

Old Sleuth Library

Billy Wayne, the St. Louis Detective. By Old Sleuth.

This Number contains a Complete Story, Unchanged and Unabridged.

No. 14

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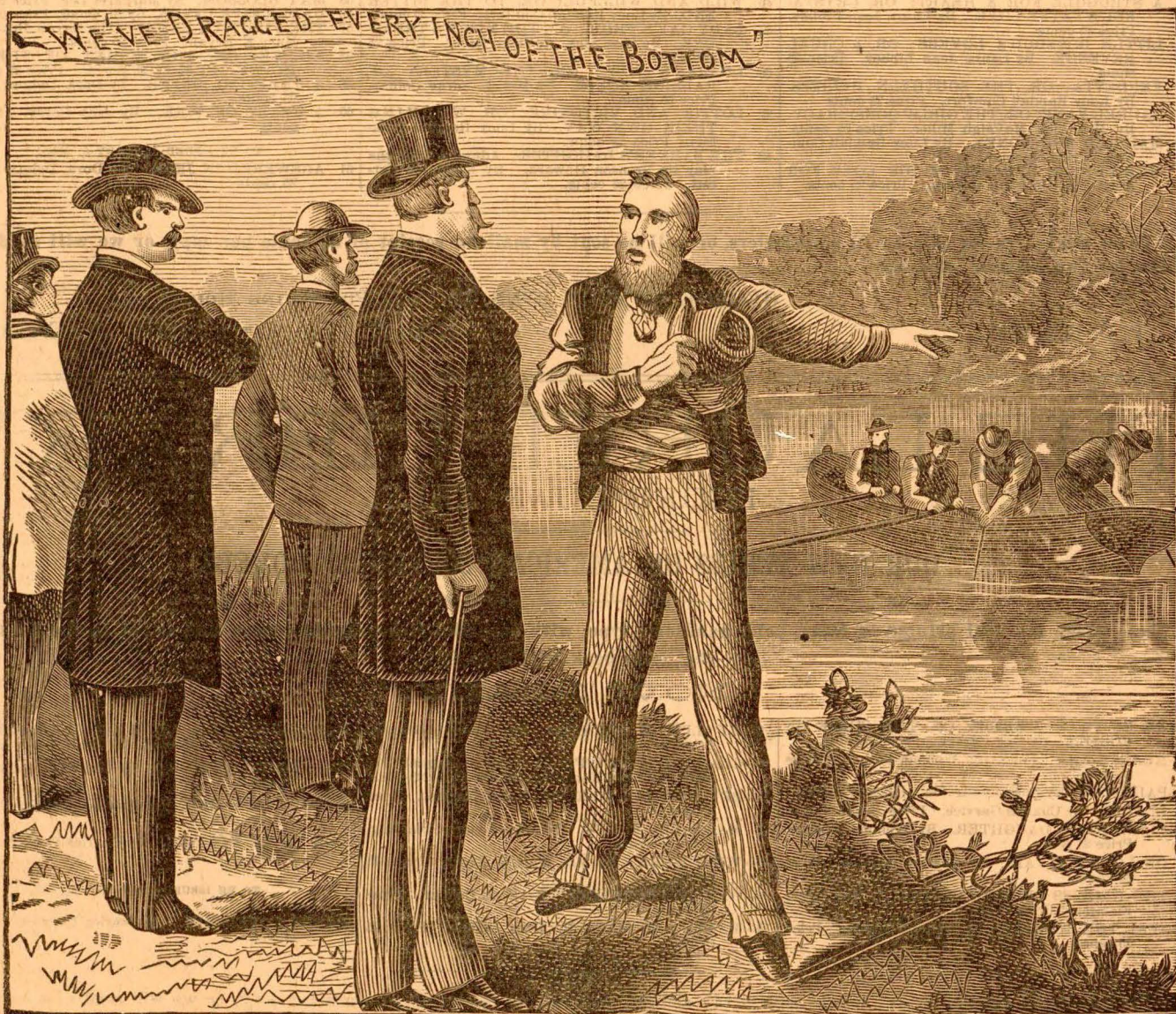
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Vol. I

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BILLY WAYNE, THE ST. LOUIS DETECTIVE.

By OLD SLEUTH.



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THE ST. LOUIS DETECTIVE;

Or, THE MYSTERY OF THE BLACK MERE.

By OLD SLEUTH.

CHAPTER

"I am here!"

The light was turned low in a large, elegantly furnished room, where two pale-faced men confronted each other; one was standing with his hand resting upon the library table, the other had evidently just entered the room.

The hour was midnight, and the surroundings were weird and oppressive.

The man who uttered the words with which we open our narrative stood just over the threshold, and there was deep meaning in his tone as he uttered the declaration, "I am here!"

"You are Billy Wayne?"

"That is my name, sir."

"You are the detective?"

"I am."

"Do you recognize me?"

"I do."

"Who am I?"

"Leon Embre."

"Mr. Wayne, you will not be offended if I ask you a few questions?"

"No, sir."

"Are you at liberty to undertake a job which may command your undivided attention and services for weeks and possibly for months?"

"I am."

"If engaged or not engaged, will you bind yourself to an oath of secrecy?"

"No, sir; I will not take an oath; my simple word is sufficient."

"I like that," answered Leon Embre; "will you give your word?"

"And bind myself in what manner?"

"To silence only."

"Am I to hold a guilty knowledge of a crime?"

"No."

"Will it be a secret I can conscientiously keep?"

"Yes."

"You have my word; engaged or unengaged my lips are sealed concerning any communication you may make to me."

"One word more; if you enter my service

you shall command your own price for your services."

"I am ready, sir, to listen to any communication you may make."

"One word more. I accept your word in good faith. I have a ghastly sight to submit to your view. I have a terrible revelation to make. You will be called upon to 'pipe' parties away up in the social scale, and when once my revelation is made I am in your power. I must trust you, and you must trust me."

"I am prepared to accept the duty, provided it is an honorable one."

"Come with me."

Leon Embre raised a lamp from the library table and led the way from the room.

Billy Wayne followed silently the lead of the man who had acted in such a weird manner, and who had promised such weird and ghastly disclosures; but despite the warning words the detective was not prepared for the ghastly horrors that, as it turned out, awaited him.

Leon Embre led the way along the great hall of the house to a small room away at the rear; at the door he came to a halt, and said,

"You are a man of iron nerve."

"How do you know?"

"I knew you by reputation when I sent for you, sir."

"I am not scared at trifles as a rule."

"It is not necessary to caution you, still I wish you to be prepared to behold an awful sight."

"I am prepared, sir."

Billy Wayne was indeed a man of iron nerve. He was a brave and experienced detective, a man who had won his way to his high position as an officer through many perils and feats of wonderful daring.

We will here state that our hero also knew Leon Embre by reputation. The latter was a young man not over five-and-twenty; his father had been reputed to be a French nobleman, an exile with the best blood of France in his veins.

Twenty years previous to the events which we record, M. Embre had arrived in Missouri,

bringing with him a lad of five summers. The stranger bought a fine estate, and lived for a few years the life of a recluse.

The best masters were procured for the education of the lad, whom he called his son and heir, and the old Frenchman took great delight in teaching the lad many accomplishments, especially in the use of weapons.

Leon was an accomplished swordsman, a sure pistol shot, and an athlete who could have competed with some of the best professionals.

When the lad reached the age of twenty his father died, leaving the boy sole heir.

The estate was not a large one. The house was a massive stone mansion surrounded by a fine park, situated in what might now be called the suburbs of St. Louis.

The father had never done any business, nor had he speculated in any way to obtain money, yet he appeared always to have a bountiful supply from some secret source, and after the father's death the secret income appeared to be continued.

The son, like the father, was very reserved, making but few acquaintances. He was studious, and led what might be called the life of a recluse.

He was not unneighborly, however, nor purse-proud, as he always made himself agreeable when brought in contact with neighbors. His establishment was not a large one, consisting merely of a male cook, a Frenchman, the latter's daughter, the only female servant in the house, and his own valet, who also was a young Frenchman or Italian.

Some other facts in the history of Leon Embre will be revealed as our narrative progresses. We wish only to state that Billy Wayne the detective was familiar with all the incidents detailed above.

When the detective said, "I am prepared," Leon Embre produced a key, opened the door of the room, crossed the threshold, and held his light aloft.

The detective followed, and a sight met his gaze that chilled his blood despite his declaration

that he was prepared to behold any sight, no matter how horrible.

A ghastly sight indeed met his view; the most ghastly sight, in some respects, he had ever encountered during his experience as a detective.

Leon Embre, as stated, held the light aloft, and its rays tell upon what at a glance appeared to be the rigid corpse of a bride!

It was indeed a ghastly sight despite the elegance of the robes in which the body was clad.

The latter were wet; and even while the detective gazed water dripped to the floor from the elegant bridal robes, and the auburn tresses which fringed the white marble-like face hung wet and dank to the floor, the ends lying in a little pool of water formed by drippings from the rich wealth of long hair.

The sight told its own story; the elegantly clad corpse had been fished from the water, and the bridal robes and silent form of the dead suggested a tale of horror that caused even the iron-nerved detective to stand and gaze with features almost as pallid as those of the dead.

CHAPTER II.

LEON EMBRE stood with his eyes fixed upon the detective. The former's face was pale, his eyes glowed with strange unnatural light, and his handsome features were set as rigid as those of a corpse.

A moment the silence prevailed, and a strange tragic tableau was presented.

Billy Wayne at length broke the silence. One word only fell from his lips, but a whole volume of interrogation was contained in that one word. He said in a low, husky voice:

"Drowned?"

In an equally husky voice the young man answered:

"It is for you to determine."

"I am not a physician."

"You are the only physician who will be called at present in this case."

"This is a mystery to me," said Wayne

"Yes. I have employed you to solve the mystery."

"What are the facts?"

"I will relate the acts anon; first tell me, was that girl drowned, or was she dead when, clad in those bridal robes, her body sunk beneath the waters?"

"Who found the body?"

"I did."

"Where?"

"In the Mere."

"The Black Mere, on Colonel Zara's place?"

"Yes."

"Was it floating on the surface?"

"No; I dragged it from the bottom."

"When?"

"An hour ago."

"Who aided you?"

"That matters not."

The detective advanced and more closely examined the features of the dead girl. They were beautiful even in death, and a remarkable fact struck the keen observant officer. The face was not bloated after the manner of drowned people usually, and Wayne discerned why the answer had come in such a strange manner to his first query, "That is for you to determine."

Our hero asked a second question in a tremulous voice.

"Is it the body of Colonel Zara's ward?"

The startling rejoinder came:

"That is for you to determine!"

The detective was taken all aback. He perceived that he stood face to face with the strangest mystery and most remarkable incident of his whole life.

"Will you relate the facts to me?" he asked.

"Later on; first tell me was she drowned?"

The detective drew his masked lantern, and, opening the mask, flashed the sharp ray of light upon the pale beautiful features.

Leon Embre stood over the detective, a look of thrilling interest upon his face, and after a moment, he asked, in a husky whisper:

"Speak! was she drowned?"

In a hesitating voice the detective answered:

"I think not."

"The body was thrown into the water after death?" continued the young man, in an interrogatory tone.

"I should say yes; but, of course, I can not speak for a certainty."

"If that body, clad in those bridal robes, was cast into the Mere after death, there must have been some purpose in the deed."

Wayne did not make an immediate answer.

"Answer!" commanded the young man, in an imperative tone.

"If such was the fact, I should say your surmise is natural."

"The deed would suggest some deep and devilish purpose."

"I should say so."

"Please note the fact."

"I will; but answer me. Do you suspect that the girl was murdered, and then cast into the lake?"

"That is a circumstance to be studied later on; but you asked me another question."

"Did I?"

"Yes."

"What did I ask?"

"You asked me if that was the body of Colonel Zara's ward."

"I remember I did."

"Why did you ask that question?"

"It was prompted by the statement that you had dragged the body from the Black Mere."

"Did you ever see Rose Zara in life?"

"Yes."

"Did you know her?"

"No, I only remember seeing her occasionally riding with the colonel."

"Do you remember her face?"

The detective was thoughtful a moment. He was calling up a recollection.

"Yes," he answered, after a moment. "I have a general recollection of her face."

"Look well upon that dead face," commanded the young man, in a tragic tone.

The detective advanced closer to the dead face, and with the light from his lantern flashing upon the marble features, he made a calm and deliberate examination.

"Well?" demanded the young man.

In a low agitated tone the detective said:

"I should say it was the face of Rose Zara."

"You remember the face of the living?"

"I do."

"Well?"

"Yes."

"And you see a resemblance?"

"I do."

A moment the young man was silent, but, after an interval, he said:

"Herein lies the awful mystery."

"How so?"

"I am prepared to swear that this is not the body of Rose Zara, and yet I have, like you, noted the resemblance."

"Had Rose a sister?"

"She was never known to mention the existence of a sister."

"The question can be easily settled," said the detective. "If Rose is living this must be the body of another."

"Alas! herein lies another mystery."

"Where is Rose?"

"I will tell you all later on."

The detective fixed his keen eyes upon the young man, and at once the conviction was forced upon his mind that he was not gazing upon the face of a maniac. The eyes that responded to his glance were those of a man as sane as a judge upon the bench.

"Did you know the young lady?"

"I did."

"Well?"

"Yes."

"And you are prepared to swear that this is not her body?"

"Yes."

"Has it been claimed that it is her body?"

"No, but they will so claim when they fish it from the Mere," came the strange remarkable answer.

The detective gazed aghast.

"When they fish it from the Mere!" he repeated.

"Yes."

"I do not understand you. The body is not in the Mere, it is here, you have already recovered it."

A terrible look came over the young man's face as he answered:

"I shall cast that body back to the water, bridal robes and all. You shall aid me."

A still more amazed look flashed over the detective's face, as he demanded:

"Why will you return it to the waters of the Mere?"

"So that the terrible game may go on. I would not remove a link of the chain of lies that is to be forged."

CHAPTER III.

BILLY WAYNE, the detective, was more mystified than ever; indeed each development of the revelation only made the case appear the most startling, weird, and remarkable of his whole experience. He said:

"You expect me to aid you to return the body to the lake?"

"Yes."

"Then you must give me most excellent reasons for my assistance."

"I will explain all to you, sir. It is my belief that one of the most iniquitous frauds ever attempted, is about being perpetrated."

"By whom?"

"Colonel Zara."

"You surprise me."

"Colonel Zara is supposed to be an honorable man."

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Wayne, I have reasons to know that he is one of the greatest villains on earth; one of the most cruel and heartless wretches who ever breathed, and as I gaze upon that dead face the suspicion crosses my mind that he is a cold-blooded murderer."

"You are making terrible accusations against a well-known and respected citizen."

"I am unmasking a villain. I am tearing aside a veil which has covered the schemes of a life-long scoundrel."

"Will you tell me all the facts?"

"I will."

"Proceed."

"You know that Miss Zara is a great heiress?"

"It has always been so reported."

"The reports were true; and it has always been supposed that Colonel Zara was a rich man."

"It has always been so reported."

"In his case the report was false; the man is in fact a penniless beggar."

"You surprise me!"

"Do you know the exact relationship existing between Colonel Zara and his ward?"

"I have always supposed she was his niece."

"Colonel Zara's brother was the second husband of Rose Zara's mother. He was not the father of Rose. The fortune came to the girl through her own father. Her step-father was a penniless man when he married the widow."

"Then her name is not rightfully Zara?"

"It is not. Her mother, when she married Zara, concealed from him the fact that she had a child, and when he married the widow he supposed she held in fee the fortune of her first husband; but she only enjoyed a life interest, and when the truth was discovered he insisted that the child, which was but an infant, should be presented to the world as his own child. And she was so presented, and the fraud has remained a secret until this day."

"How did you chance to learn the facts?" demanded the detective.

"The facts were related to Rose in my presence by her old nurse, and the woman holds undoubted proofs of her statements."

The detective was thoughtful while the young man continued his narrative.

"The mother died, and the girl, who has no blood relatives living, became the charge of her step-father, and when the latter died suddenly she became the ward of her step-uncle, the present Colonel Zara."

"How about the fortune?"

"What designs the step-father had I know not, but it is a fact, as I have ascertained, that, according to the will on record, Rose is the heir to the whole estate and would, upon arriving at legal age, come into possession."

The detective did not interrupt the strange narrative until the young man stopped for a moment, when he asked:

"Where does the villainy come in?"

"Another will is upon record."

"Aha!" muttered Billy Wayne, "I begin to see now where the fraud begins. Who is the legatee under the second will?"

"The second will is made and signed by Rose Zara, under her true and proper name of Rose Richland. The will is skillfully drawn, large bequests are made to charitable institutions, but the bulk of the property goes to Colonel Zara."

"The will is regularly drawn?"

"Yes."

"And witnessed?"

"Yes."

"The signature is correct?"

"It is."
"The girl made the will according to her own intent?"

"No."

"How do you know to the contrary?"

"I learned the facts from her own lips."

"What are the real facts?"

"The girl supposed she was willing the bulk of the property to charitable institutions, giving only an income to Colonel Zara."

"I begin to see where we are drifting in this remarkable little romance," said the detective.

"No, sir, not yet, let me tell you all. I met Rose Zara. We met and loved, and then the truth, the fatal truth was revealed. Colonel Zara also loved the girl, not as a child but as one whom he would wed, and when he learned of her engagement to me his wrath knew no bounds; but he is a deep, cunning man. After the first exhibition of disappointment he changed his tactics. He deceived Rose. He deceived me. He pretended to consent to the marriage. Indeed, he became its most enthusiastic supporter, and all went well until to-night."

"And what happened this night?"

"This night was to have witnessed my wedding to Rose Zara or Richland."

"And there is your bride," said the detective in a solemn voice, pointing to the gayly bedecked but cold, wet-clad corpse.

A look of strange disgust came over the young man's face as he ejaculated:

"No, no, it's false, it's a devilish scheme, that is not the body of my dear, beautiful, loving Rose!"

The detective thought differently, but he did not express his idea.

The young man continued his narrative. He said:

"But few guests were invited, the hour was eight o'clock when the ceremony was to have taken place. I reached the house a few moments before eight; I was met at the door by one of the guests who told me a strange, a terrible tale, and the man, as far as he was concerned, told me the truth."

"What did he tell you?"

"My intended bride was with two of her companions who had assisted in preparing her for the wedding. She appeared cheerful and happy as it was stated to me, and about an hour before the appointed time excused herself for a few moments and left the room. Half an hour passed and the two girls went to look for her. She could not be found."

The young man's emotion caused him to cease talking. The detective sat silent and meditative, satisfied in his own mind that the body of the missing bride lay there cold in death.

At length the young man resumed his narrative. He said:

"An alarm was given out and search instituted, but my bride that was to be could not be found."

Again the young man stopped, but after an interval he resumed, and said:

"Sir, strange as it may seem, the moment I heard the story it came over me that Colonel Zara had carried out some deep and damnable scheme. I did not go to search for my bride. I demanded to see Colonel Zara."

"Hod," cried the detective, "you did not denounce him?"

"No, sir, I did not. He is a deep man. A crafty schemer, but he will find me his match." And again resuming his narrative the young man related facts even more thrilling than any we have as yet recorded.

CHAPTER IV.

It was a solemn scene presented in that room with two pale faced men holding their terrible dialogue over the strangely but elegantly robed corpse.

Continuing his narrative, Leon Embre said: "Colonel Zara refused at first to see me, giving as a reason that he was stricken and overcome by his great sorrow following upon the calamity of the disappearance of his ward."

"The answer brought to me from the colonel only strengthened my belief in the man's guilt, as the mere disappearance of the bride under all the circumstances did not forbode such dire calamity. It was but an hour following her strange disappearance that I presented myself, and no thorough search had as yet been made."

"Why were you led to suspect the man?"

"I will tell you in good time, let me proceed with my narrative. I insisted upon seeing Colonel Zara, and at length he consented to

meet me. He received me in his library and upon my entrance into the room he exclaimed:

"Leon, this is terrible."

"It is certainly very singular, sir, but not terrible yet. She will be found."

"Never in life," came the answer.

"Why do you say never in life?"

"I have good reasons for my declaration."

"Where is she?"

"Dead!"

"How do you know that she is dead?"

"I am sure she is dead, dear, beautiful, and unfortunate girl. Oh, Leon," he cried, "my heart bleeds for you!"

"But, sir, why should we look for anything so fatal?"

"Ah, I have good reasons—good reasons; would that I had made a confidant of you sooner, but we will find her body in the Black Mere."

"Has my bride been murdered?"

"No, no."

"Then why do you say she will be found in the Black Mere?"

"Insanity runs in her family. It always developed itself under circumstances of unusual excitement. I knew this, and I should have watched her."

"Tell me plainly," I said, "what is your suspicion?" and he answered:

"I believe Rose has drowned herself in the Mere. To-morrow I will have the lake dragged, and I know we shall find the body of the poor dear girl."

"Have you expressed your suspicions to any one but me, sir?"

"No, not yet."

"Was she seen going toward the Mere?"

"No, no, she was seen to leave the room, and from that moment human eye has not rested upon her."

"You will have the Mere dragged in the morning?"

"Yes."

"And if you do not find the body?"

"We can indulge in a hope that she will be found."

"I will come over to-morrow, and be present when the Mere is being dragged," I said, and I left the presence of the scoundrel."

The young man had finished his strange narrative, and a moment's silence followed. The detective was revolving all the strange facts in his mind, but at length he asked:

"What reason have you for thinking that the girl was murdered; have you searched for marks of violence?"

Leon Embre fixed his eyes on the detective and asked:

"Have you noted well all the incidents of my narrative?"

"Yes."

"Then why do you ask that question?"

"I will answer you frankly. I believe that is the body of your lost bride."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Then you are not as cute as I think with all your experience you ought to be."

"You drew the body from the lake?"

"Yes, I went direct from the presence of the colonel. I rode over to my own home, secured the assistance of my valet, proceeded to the lake, and in less than half an hour drew to the surface what you see there." And with a shudder the young man pointed toward the corpse.

"And you are satisfied that this is not the body of Rose Zara?"

"I am satisfied. See here."

The young man drew from his pocket a photograph, and submitting it to the detective, said:

"Examine for yourself."

We will here state that the detective was satisfied that there was something wrong, and that a fearful crime had been committed. His questions were merely intended to force all the information from the young man that he possibly could. Had he accepted Embre's theories the latter would have ceased imparting information, and Billy Wayne was delving for the bottom facts, and he was also "piping" the young man, not that he suspected him of guilt, but it was his method to "collar" the whole business.

Billy took the photograph and examined it closely. He then made a still closer examination of the face of the dead, and he made the thrilling, the astounding, the extraordinary discovery, that indeed the corpse was not that of Rose Zara.

Wayne had indeed fallen upon a most marvel-

ously strange mystery, but he did not admit his conviction. He said to the young man:

"Why did you go to the Mere?"

"I expected to find the body of Rose. I believed she had been murdered, and now mark well what I say: Colonel Zara told me *he feared Rose had drowned herself*. Drowning is death by suffocation; that poor soul was not drowned, that body was *tossed into the Mere after death*. Now, sir, need I make additional explanation?"

"No, I will admit that this is not the body of Rose Zara. I will admit that suspicion points strongly toward the colonel; but tell me, if this is not the body of Rose, whose body is it?"

"I can not tell."

"You have no suspicion?"

"I have no suspicion."

"There is a wonderful resemblance between the missing Rose and that dead woman."

"Yes."

"And you can not account for it?"

"I can not."

"What is your theory?"

"Rose lives!"

"Where is she?"

"The colonel knows."

"What is his purpose?"

"If he succeeds in palming off that body as the body of the real heiress, and succeeds to the property, he will then secretly murder the poor girl and make sure of his prize."

"You are an excellent reasoner. You would make a splendid detective."

"Thank you; I propose to play the detective rôle with your assistance."

Billy Wayne held a long talk with the young man, during the course of which he developed facts which will be duly disclosed as our narrative proceeds.

After a long talk the detective asked:

"And now what will you do with the body?"

"Restore it to the lake."

"Who is to take command of the operations?"

"You, sir."

"Then we will not restore the body to the lake."

"Why not, and what shall we do with it?"

The detective smiled, and proved his real experience over the natural cuteness of the young man with the remark:

"As long as we keep the dead the colonel will hold the living!"

CHAPTER V.

The young man gazed at the detective in a perplexed manner and said:

"I do not understand."

Billy Wayne smiled and answered:

"Remember your own theory. The colonel will seek to palm that body off as the self-destroyed Rose Zara."

"Yes."

"Should he succeed he will kill the real heiress."

"Yes."

"Well, if we hold that body we beat his game from the start; we bewilder him; we knock him out. He will not know what to do, but he will not dare harm the living."

"Finding the body missing he may really make sure of murdering the heiress."

"Never! the mystery of the disappearance of that corpse from the Mere will lay such a shadow on his soul that he will not dare harm the living. He will know that some Nemesis is on his track, some mysterious personage, who, as it were, has anticipated his dead y game. He may be forced to a confession, but you mark my words, if Rose be living at the hour that Mere is dragged, and that body be not found, she will be sacred from persecution at his hands. He will need her living to save his own life!"

"Ah, I see! Yes, yes, you are right!"

"Again," continued the detective, "you and I can be present when the Mere is dragged; you, by appointment. I will be 'the silent man in black.' We can watch the villain as Hamlet watched his mother's royal paramour, and by his speaking face we will read his innocence or his guilt."

"Yes, yes, your scheme is the right one; indeed, you shall take full charge of this case. I will but follow and obey."

"After the dragging of the lake we will set first to learn who that poor thing was in life."

"Yes, there is a mystery there."

"A deep mystery, indeed; it is the strangest case that has ever been called to my attention, but you may rest assured that all shall be made as bright and clear as day."

"What shall we do with the body?"
 "Who knows of its presence here?"
 "Myself and my valet only."
 "Your valet! Can you depend upon him?"

"I would trust him with my life!"
 "That's all right, but could you trust him with your pocket-book?"
 "I say I can trust him with my life!"
 "Yes, yes, but can you trust him with your pocket-book?"

"I do not understand."
 "I will speak more plainly; how long has he been with you?"

"Since my boyhood."
 "You must remember that there is a possibility that the man is already in the pay of Colonel Zara."

"Impossible!"
 "We shall see! To-morrow, I will find out! Meantime we have a ghastly job before us!"

"We will bury the body," said Leon.
 "No."

"What will you do?"
 "Take it to the city to an embalmer's, and some day we may confront Colonel Zara with the silent evidence of a terrible crime. He will not find the body in the lake, but when the right time comes we may find it for him."
 "We must move secretly."

"Yes; you and I must act the whole funeral role; we must be sexton, coachmen, grave-diggers, pall-bearers, and chief mourners; we must do the whole business."

It was after midnight when a carriage, carrying a ghastly occupant, was driven from the great Embre mansion.

Billy Wayne knew just where to go; oftentimes he had called on the embalmer's skill to preserve some weird float, come from the yellow waters of the Mississippi.

It was daylight when Leon Embre returned alone to his home.

As the day dawned more brightly, a quiet man in black appeared upon the premises surrounding the mansion. The man in black wandered over the grounds until he came upon another man in black. The latter was a foreigner in appearance, and appeared greatly surprised when confronted by the individual first mentioned.

The second man in black was Victor Verder, the valet of Leon Embre, and our readers have already guessed the identity of the stranger.

Billy Wayne, in his disguise as the quiet man in black, walked toward Victor and saluted him; the valet returned the salutation and demanded:

"Are you seeking the master, sir?"
 "No; I am seeking you!" came the prompt answer.

"You are seeking me, sir?"
 "I am; your name is Victor Verder?"
 "That is my name."
 "You are the valet of Mr. Leon Embre?"
 "I am."

"You are a rich man, Victor?"
 The valet eyed the speaker, and after a moment retorted:

"What is that your business?"
 "Well, I have a chance to make you a rich man if you are not already rich enough."
 "I am not already rich enough."

The detective advanced close to the valet and whispered a few words in his ear.

"Go from here, you villain!" cried the valet, his face convulsed with indignation.

"You need not get so mad and seek to take my life, simply because I offered you a more remunerative position!"

"With Colonel Zara?"
 "Yes."

"Sir, you are a villain! and Colonel Zara is a greater villain!"

"He is a gentleman, and will pay you ten times the wages you are receiving now."

The valet was thoughtful for a moment, but at length he said, as a peculiar expression played over his swarthy face:

"I wish you would make the proposition to my present master; if he consents to part with me I will entertain your proposition."

"I will make the offer in the presence of your present master."

"You will?"
 "I will."
 "Come!"

At that moment Leon Embre appeared in sight, walking through the grounds; as he approached the detective said:

"I wish to engage your valet."
 "Well, what does he say?"
 "He leaves the matter with you."
 "I can part with him!"
 The valet approached his master and demanded:

"Speak you the truth?"
 "I do."

The knife of the valet was turned toward his own heart, but Billy Wayne was on deck; the blow was stayed and explanations followed.

Our hero was fully convinced of the valet's fealty.

An hour later Leon Embre started toward the Zara mansion. He had promised to be present at the dragging of the Mere.

The young man reached the house just as the party was organized to start for the lake.

The salutations that passed between the colonel and the disappointed groom were cold and formal. The party reached the Black Mere, and there followed some strange and thrilling incidents.

CHAPTER VI.

WE have written that the salutations exchanged between Col. Zara and Leon Embre were cold and formal; and indeed they were. The latter looked upon the former as a bitter enemy, and as the sequel will show Col. Zara looked upon the young man as the only one who would have a motive in tracing home a deeply conceived conspiracy.

On the way to the Mere, Col. Zara said, addressing Leon:

"My only regret is, Leon, that I did not reveal to you the fatal secret."

"What secret, sir?"
 "The tendency toward insanity."

"From whom did she inherit the infirmity?"
 "Her father."

"Major Richland?"
 "Yes."

"He was a maniac?"
 "No, not exactly a maniac, but under excitement he always developed signs of mental derangement."

"Had you ever observed signs of the infirmity in Rose?"

"Never or I should have told you."
 "I believe, sir, my bride still lives."

"No, no, Leon, she is dead. We shall find her body in the Mere; and now let me advise you not to remain."

"How do you mean?"
 "You must not be present when the body is found."

"Why not, sir?"
 "The sight will be too terrible for you under all the circumstances."

"I am a man, sir, not a woman. I shall assist in the search, but I am satisfied the body will not be found in the Mere."

"I wish I shared your hope, but I can not."
 "It's strange, sir, that you should be so assured that Rose's body will be found in the Mere."

"It will be, I am sure."
 "No, sir, it will not be. Rose was not insane. She would not drown herself; such a theory is preposterous. Remember, I saw and talked with her as late as five o'clock yesterday afternoon, and I will say that she was calm, cheerful, and hopeful—indeed, happy. She so expressed herself to me. Such a change could not take place."

"You will force me to a confession."
 "If you have a confession to make, sir, I trust you will make it without being forced."

"I desired to spare your feelings."
 "In what manner?"

"I did not wish to dash all hope from your mind."

"You need not thus tenderly consider my feelings, sir. I am strong enough to face the truth, no matter how terrible the revelation."

"I have evidence that the body of Rose will be found in the Mere."

"Indeed, sir! Why did you not tell me?"
 "I desired to spare your feelings as long as possible."

"Sir, I desire to know the truth!"
 "Had I better tell you?"

"Certainly, sir. I insist that you tell me!"
 "Half an hour before your arrival last night, I had evidence that Rose had drowned herself in the Mere."

"You had the evidence when I saw you last night?"

"Yes."
 "Positive evidence?"

"I did."
 "Tell me all."

"A man came to me before I knew that Rose was missing. He was shown into the library where I was sitting, and he said to me: 'Colonel Zara, some one has been drowned in the Mere!' and he told me that he had been coming through the park when he encountered a female figure in white. He followed the figure, and, to his horror, saw her plunge into the lake. He could not swim, and he was too surprised and paralyzed with fear and amazement to make an outcry, and the person drowned before his eyes. He stood at the verge of the lake and saw her drown."

"This is a strange tale, colonel."

"Ah, but it is still more strange that at the moment I did not dream of an accident having happened to our precious Rose, and it was not until I learned of the dear girl's disappearance that I realized who the suicide in white really was."

"The man gave no alarm?"
 "None whatever; he came direct to me."

"And did you tell this strange tale to any one?"

"Yes; the moment it was known that Rose was missing, I told several gentlemen the strange facts."

"Whom did you tell?"
 "Mr. Winston."

"And you did not consider it right to tell me?"

"No."
 "Who was the man who brought you the tragic tale?"

"I never saw him before in my life. He can probably be found, however."

"Did any one see the man, save yourself?"
 "Yes."

"Who?"
 "Mr. Winston and several of the servants at the house."

"You did not detain the man?"
 "No."

"You do not know his name or where he resides?"
 "No."

"Why did you not institute a search last night?"
 "We did."

"And you did not let me know that such was your purpose?"
 "No; I acted to save your feelings."

"And did you make any discoveries?"
 "Yes; but do not press me further."

"Yes, sir; I must know all! What did you discover?"

"We found a bridal slipper."
 "Where?"

"On the margin of the lake."
 "It was one worn by Rose?"

"Yes."
 "You fully identified it?"

"Yes."
 "But you did not drag the Mere?"

"No."
 "Why not?"

"We had no appliances. I sent for the necessary appliances."

"You should have kept the man."
 "Yes, I know; but I can find him."

"Maybe not, but he could have shown you where to search for the body."

"Yes, but we know."
 "How do you know?"

"We shall search opposite where the slipper was found; but I shall find the man; yes, yes, I shall find him."

"I do not believe you ever will."
 "I shall."

"No, sir, you will never find him, but he shall be found."

Leon Embre spoke in a determined tone, and Col. Zara raised his eyes and glanced at the young man with an alarmed look in his eyes.

The words of Leon Embre were the first warning notes of danger; they were the first indication of a suspicion. There was no great significance in the mere declaration, "The man shall be found!" but when coupled with the statement, "You will not find him, but he shall be found!" the words were ominous to some one.

"Who will find him?" demanded Col. Zara.
 "I will."

"You will?"

"Yes, I will find him if I spend my whole fortune in rewards."

"What can his discovery amount to, sir?"

"We shall see when I find him."

A cold gleam shone in Col. Zara's eyes, and he said:

"Your words are insulting to me."

There was an answering flash in Leon's eyes as he said:

"I can not see where the insult comes in, sir!"

The two men understood each other; the war was opened.

CHAPTER VII.

COLONEL ZARA was a physically brave man. He was one of those silent, reserved, resentful men who could carry his designs in his mind for years, waiting for an opportunity to attain some given purpose. He was a dangerous man—a devil in human form—and his devilishness was betrayed in the manner in which he had waited even until the wedding-night before carrying out his deep purpose.

The man showed the exactness of his calculations. He did not proceed to extremes until all hopes of obtaining his end by other means were gone. He was disposed to avoid all risks; but at the last moment his arrangements were complete, and he carried out his fell designs.

He was a dangerous man as an enemy because of his very expertness in hiding his designs. He covered up disappointment, had skillfully hidden his chagrin, and had made even Leon believe, for a season, that he was the young man's friend.

The mask, however, was at length torn off. Leon had breathed a suspicion; the colonel had resented it; and, from that moment, the young man was doomed—his death was decreed, even as kings in the olden times smiled upon a man who, within the hour, was led to the block.

In answer to Leon's remark, "I can not see where the insult comes in," the colonel said:

"Your words imply a doubt of the truthfulness of my statement."

"My words can not be so construed. You were lax in not holding the man; you may be lax in finding him."

"What purpose can there be in finding him if we find the body? The man's story will be confirmed, and he will have nothing more to relate."

"Colonel Zara, Rose never committed suicide! The man murdered her, if his story be true. I shall search for him as the assassin."

Col. Zara turned slightly pale, but an observer would not have been able to decide whether the pallor was born of fear or anger.

The above conversation occurred on the way to the Mere.

The searching party had preceded the gentlemen, and a number of neighbors were present. As the Mere was situated on private ground, mere idlers were not permitted to be present, although the rumor had gone abroad that the heiress of the great property had drowned herself in the lake.

The Black Mere was but a small sheet of water, situated in the midst of a dense growth of trees, which towered over it, giving its shaded waters a black aspect; hence its name, the "Black Mere."

Although not large—covering only a few acres—the lake was very deep. Indeed, the villagers round about were apt to state that it was a bottomless pit; but there were those who had dragged its bottom over, previous to the event which called for its being dragged at the time of which we write.

Col. Zara and Leon separated at the verge of the lake.

A small group of pale-faced men watched the workers as the irons were now and then brought to the surface; and among the latter was a respectable-looking man in black, who appeared to take a deep interest in the operations.

The man appeared to be a stranger. He had not spoken to any one but he displayed a keen interest in all that was going on.

Col. Zara observed the man after a moment, and inquired:

"Who is that gentleman?"

He was answered that he was a stranger.

"Does no one know who he is?"

No one appeared to know who he was.

The man was dressed in plain black, but he was a very shrewd and intelligent-looking person. The stranger's presence appeared to annoy Col. Zara, and he kept his eye upon him.

Another matter appeared to worry the colonel, and that was the ill success of the men with the drag irons. It was strange that their ill success should annoy him, as one would naturally suppose that the mere finding of the body would be accepted as a most unfavorable fact.

Col. Zara at length walked over to the stranger, and said:

"Good-morning, sir."

"Good-morning," answered the stranger.

"Ah, your name is—"

The stranger made no answer.

"Did I understand you, sir; what is your name?" said Col. Zara.

"Yes, sir, you understood me. I did not tell you my name!" came the saucy and independent answer.

"What is your name, sir, if you please?"

"You would not recognize my name, sir."

The polite amenities were waived, and Col. Zara demanded:

"By whose permission are you here, sir?"

"My own."

"What right have you here?"

"I have a right, sir!"

"Will you explain why you are here?"

"Certainly."

"Please do so."

"I am here to watch the finding of the body."

Leon Embre walked over to where the man in black and Col. Zara were talking.

An angry look shot into the colonel's eyes, as he said:

"Do you recognize me, sir?"

"I do. You are Colonel Zara."

"Then you recognize my right to order you to leave these premises?"

"No, sir!"

"I so command you!"

The man in black passed a signal to Leon, and answered:

"I will not obey your command. I am here by an authority higher than yours, sir!"

"What mean you?"

"My words are plain."

"I am the master here, and you must leave or give me a satisfactory excuse for remaining!"

"I am a detective, sir."

Col. Zara's face flushed with anger.

"You are a detective?"

"I am."

"Why are you here?"

"I reckon the circumstances warrant my presence."

A moment the colonel stood in silence, but at length he remarked:

"As an officer of the law I recognize your right to be here."

The dragging proceeded, but no body was found. There were no tides to move a body which had once sunk to the bottom, and the opinion began to grow that the girl had not drowned herself in the Black Mere.

A gentleman who was present advanced to Col. Zara and said:

"Colonel, you have reason to hope for the best, the men say there is no body in the lake."

"There must be!" exclaimed the colonel, unguardedly.

The gentleman looked surprised.

"Unless," added the colonel, "the man who came to me with the story lied!"

"The man must have lied, and I think, sir, it is your duty to find the man and have him account for the story he told you."

"The man will be found!" came a voice.

Leon Embre was the speaker.

At this moment, one of the men who had been engaged in the search came and said:

"Colonel, there is no body in that lake! I'll stake my life on it! We've dragged every inch of the bottom!"

CHAPTER VIII.

COLONEL ZARA looked bewildered.

"The body must be there!" he said.

"No, sir; we have made a thorough search. If it were there, we should have found it long ago."

"There is some mystery here," suggested a gentleman.

Col. Zara was perplexed; and there was a reason for his perplexity, as the sequel will show; and, as he stood there, he chanced to look up and saw the detective's eyes fixed upon him. The quiet man in black had joined the group which surrounded the presumed master of the lands.

"I wish the search continued," said the colonel.

"We can continue it, sir; but we will go over the same ground."

"Very well; go over the same ground."

The search continued for another three hours, but no body was found; and, at length, the colonel was compelled to admit that there was no body in the lake, and the search was discontinued.

The party returned toward the house; some gentlemen going to their homes, and others waiting to return with the colonel.

The latter stepped over to the detective.

"I would like to see you, sir."

"When?"

"At your earliest convenience."

"Where?"

"At my house."

"Shall I return with you?"

"No; I would prefer that no one should know of your presence."

"I will come to-night, sir."

"At what hour?"

"You may look for me between nine and ten o'clock."

"I will expect you."

The colonel returned toward the house without speaking to Leon or inviting him to accompany the party.

Leon remained by the lake; so also did the detective. The latter approached the former and said:

"Go to your home. I will join you. Do not be seen speaking to me."

An hour later, the detective and Leon were in the latter's library.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked Leon.

"Colonel Zara is a villain."

"A murderer?"

"He may be; but he has not murdered Rose Richland."

"I fear you are mistaken."

"I know I am not."

"You are satisfied that the body we have in our possession is not that of Rose Richland?"

"I am."

"What think you now of my theory?"

"First tell me what the colonel said to you this morning?"

Leon repeated the conversation that had passed.

"We must find the man who told the story."

"Bah! there was no such man."

"Yes, there was."

"I believe it to be a tale of the colonel's."

"No. He is a deep man. He arranged to have the story told to him. He would have produced the man, had the body been found; but now he will not. But we must find him."

"Can we?"

"Oh, certainly; I'll find him, never you fear; and I will come upon him suddenly. But, Leon, I've something to tell you."

"Well?"

"Your life is in danger!"

"From what quarter?"

"The colonel knows you are on his track, and if my estimate of him is correct, he will seek to get you out of the way—have you missing, and it can be told that the loss of your intended bride drove you to suicide!"

"You need have no fear. I can take care of myself."

"You can not."

"I am no coward, and I am forewarned."

"No man is forewarned against a secret assassin; but I have something to tell you. Colonel Zara has requested me to call and see him."

"What is his purpose?"

"We can tell better after my interview with him; but listen to me: for a day or two be careful where you go; remain home at night."

"Bah! do you suppose I fear that man?"

"He is a dangerous man—one of the most dangerous men in the State; indeed, one of the most dangerous men I ever met; he possesses an iron nerve. He is ready in resources, and he means mischief. He is not bent by to-day's failure. He is bothered, perplexed, and mystified, but he is game, and he means to carry out his game."

"I will be on my guard, but I will not make a prisoner of myself."

"I fear you do not realize your peril; listen to me: that man's whole game hangs now upon your life or death! He will brave any peril to win!"

"But I tell you I will be on my guard."

"You must take other precautions. I wish

to tell you this matter will be settled in a few days."

"In a few days?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I will find the girl."

"You are fully satisfied that she lives?"

"I am now."

"Why do you say now?"

"Simply until this morning I believed that the heiress was the victim, but now I am satisfied that she lives."

"Who is the girl whose body was cast in the lake?"

"That is a mystery we must solve. Did Rose ever speak to you of a family mystery?"

"Never."

"Very well, we will find the living, and then we will study the identity of the dead. I may solve that mystery to-night."

"How?"

"When I have my interview with Zara."

"You have a suspicion as to the reason of his request to see you?"

"I have."

"What is your theory?"

"I will tell you some other time. Now, all I wish to do is to warn you of the necessity of guarding yourself."

"I tell you that you need have no fear."

"I will remain with you to-night. I will return here after my visit to the colonel's, but you need not wait up for me; give me a key and assign me a room."

"I will be glad to have you make my house your home, but not on my own account."

"You will learn in good time that my precautions are well grounded. I tell you we have to deal with a dangerous man—one of the most dangerous men in the State."

The two men had a long consultation; they ate supper together, talked over many strange and startling incidents, and at eight o'clock the detective started for the home of Col. Zara.

Leon had loaned Billy Wayne a fast horse, and the latter rode away, fully satisfied in his mind that the night would be fraught with the most startling incidents; and, as the sequel showed, the detective was not mistaken.

Billy Wayne was a first-class man—a fearless fellow, experienced, and as cute and cunning as any man in the business.

He started for Col. Zara's house ahead of time. He wished to take a few observations before presenting himself before the arch schemer.

Billy had an idea that Rose Richland was still concealed somewhere in the mansion, and he had made up his mind to steal a march on the colonel, and make a search before such a contingency could be anticipated.

A few hundred yards from the great entrance to the grounds surrounding the house, the detective alighted and picketed his horse. He anticipated encountering strange adventures, but did not dream of the thrilling incidents that the night was destined to develop.

CHAPTER IX.

BILLY WAYNE in his own way made certain quiet investigations. He spent an hour, and just at half past nine he entered the house.

His ring at the door was answered by a male servant.

"Is Colonel Zara at home?"

"Are you the gentleman whom he expected?"

"I am."

"He is at home, sir."

There was a light in the hall, the detective examined the man's face, and at once recognized a rascal.

"Have you lived here long?" asked the officer.

The man answered in an obsequious manner:

"No, sir, I am a new servant."

"Where were you last night when the young lady disappeared?"

The servant shot a quick inquiring glance at the officer; the usual conventional look of the servant vanished for the moment, and was supplanted by a glare of keen intelligence.

"You will find the master in the library, sir."

"Yes, that's all right, but where were you last night when the young lady disappeared?"

"I don't know as it concerns you, sir, a stranger."

"You were not here. Where were you?"

"If I was not here I was where my master sent me."

"And he sent you anywhere?"

"Why are you asking me these questions? You're making quite bold, I'll refer you to my master."

There was a thoughtful look upon the detective's face. He was a quick, observant man, and up to all the little tricks and devices of his craft, and at the first set out he had struck a "point."

"Will you show me to your master?"

"That's what I'm waiting to do."

The man led the way along the great hall to a rear room. He opened the door, and, stepping aside, said, respectfully:

"You will find my master within, sir; he expects you."

The detective stepped into the room. There was a lamp upon the library table, but it was turned low, and only a "dim, religious light" was diffused through the apartment.

The colonel sat in a large chair at the table.

"Good-evening," said the detective.

"Good-evening," came the response, and a request to be seated.

A moment's silence followed, broken, at length, by the detective, who said:

"You wished to see me, sir?"

"Yes."

"I am here."

"You were at the lake this morning?"

"Yes, sir."

"You had heard of the disappearance of my ward?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where did you obtain the information?"

"We detectives obtain a great deal of information, but we do not always feel at liberty to name its source."

"Are you a rich man?"

"No, sir."

"Are you attached to the regular force?"

"Not the city force at present, sir; I am on general orders."

"You're in the pay of the authorities?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you ever take private jobs?"

"Sometimes, sir."

"Are you at liberty to do so?"

"When not engaged on a special case for the State or city."

"You were employed to come to the Mere this morning?"

The detective made no answer.

"You do not answer me?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"When I meet a gentleman who knows a thing and states it positively, I never contradict him."

"My statement was intended interrogatively."

"Then you wish to know whether I was employed?"

"Yes."

"And if I should tell you, your next question would be who employed me?"

"Very likely."

"If I answer neither question, sir, I am all right. I would call your attention to the fact that you requested my presence here. I did not come as a volunteer."

"You are right."

"Did you want me, sir, for any business of your own?"

"I did."

"I am at your service to listen to a statement of your business."

"Have you heard the facts of the disappearance of my ward?"

"I have heard several statements, sir."

"Let me hear what you have heard."

"I would prefer, sir, to hear your statement of the facts, in case you wish to ask my advice or opinion on any one point."

"You are a very shrewd man."

"I am an experienced detective, sir."

"Are you at liberty to enter my service?"

"I am at liberty to enter your service if the service, upon its presentation, suits me."

"I propose to engage a detective."

"They are a useful class of men, sir."

"I pay well to a man to serve me well."

"That is encouraging, sir, for a man to enter your service."

"Are you at present specially engaged?"

"I'm always more or less engaged, in some case."

"If you enter my service and give satisfaction, I will pay you more than well. I will give you a year's salary."

"A very generous offer, sir. What is the service you wish performed?"

"I wish the facts of my ward's disappearance to be satisfactorily explained."

"What do you suspect, sir?"

"Last night I suspected suicide; now my mind is changed."

"What do you suspect now, sir?"

"A murder."

The detective was silent. Billy wanted time to catch the game the colonel was set to play.

"You are led to think your ward was murdered?" he said, after a moment. "Why do you think so?"

"Because the body was not found."

"What bearing has that incident upon the case?"

"A man came here and told me that he had seen a female plunge into the lake. No body was found, and now I am led to believe that there was design in telling me that story."

"Do you think the man who told you the story was the murderer?"

"No."

"What do you believe?"

"I believe the man really saw what he said he did."

"I do not understand."

"I believe the whole thing was a conspiracy."

"Who could have any motive in murdering the girl?"

"That I can not conceive."

"Let me see," said the detective, deliberately, "there is a will or record, I believe?"

The colonel was silent.

"A will," continued the detective, "made and signed by the dead girl, and in that will you are the legatee."

The colonel was still silent.

As stated, there was but a dim light in the room. The detective was studying the face of the colonel, when suddenly a weird suspicion crossed his mind. He imagined he had made a most wonderful and thrilling discovery, and at once he set to push his suspicion, as it was the most remarkable incident in the whole case.

CHAPTER X.

THE detective said, boldly:

"Colonel, circumstances would point to you as the only man having a motive to do away with the girl."

"What do you mean, sir?" exclaimed the colonel, in an enraged tone.

"I do not mean anything. I merely wish to sustain the theory of suicide, as I do not see, from all I have learned in the case, who could have a motive in destroying the girl."

"The girl may have made another will."

"Yes, that is possible."

"And I certainly could have no motive in taking the life of my own niece."

"Do not fly off, colonel, and think that I am accusing you of murder."

"No, sir, I would not permit you to do so—but tell me, have you any theory as to her disappearance?"

"Yes; I have a theory."

"What do you think?"

"I don't believe she is dead."

"Not dead!"

"No."

"Who was it then who was seen to plunge into the lake?"

"That is a matter that must be investigated. I doubt whether any one was seen to plunge into the lake."

"I know the man told the truth."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"His story has been confirmed."

"By whom? and in what manner, sir?"

"I'm not at liberty to tell now, but at the proper time I have some strange facts to submit to those who have a right to know them."

"As I am an officer, I will take the liberty to say, sir, that it behooves you to make your statement as speedily as possible."

"Why, sir?"

"Since the body was not found in the Mere, you are open to grave suspicion yourself."

"You villain! what do you mean?" exclaimed the colonel.

"Do not call me a villain, sir!"

"But are you not insinuating that I am an assassin?"

"No, sir, and I do not see why you should be so sensitive; but you will remember that you were the first one to suggest that the body would be found in the Mere."

"I have told you why I was led to the suspicion."

"Take my advice and find the man who told you the story: and now, colonel, I've a question to ask: did Miss Richland have a sister?"

"A sister! what nonsense! no, sir!"

"You are sure?"

"I am; why do you ask?"

"Well, I thought if she had a sister it might help to clear up the mystery."

"What mystery?"

"The mystery of the girl's disappearance; and now, sir, one more question, have you a brother?"

"I think," said the colonel, "you are here to ask questions, not to answer them."

The man's face was deadly pale, and his voice trembled as he spoke:

"I will bid you good-evening, colonel, I reckon you are through with me?"

"No; I've some questions to ask you."

"You must defer your questions until another time."

"Where do you go?"

"I have an appointment."

"With whom?"

"I'm not at liberty to tell my business."

"I will ask you a plain question. Are you to meet Leon Embre to-night?"

The colonel's voice trembled as he asked the question.

"I am not to meet Mr. Embre to-night."

"Is he the man who engaged you to attend the search at the Mere?"

"No, sir."

"Will you tell me who engaged you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who?"

"No one."

"You went there of your own volition."

"I did; and now, sir, good-night."

"I wish you would remain here."

"Why remain?"

"I wish to talk with you."

"We have been talking, sir."

"I may wish to engage you in this case."

"You can see me at another time; good-night, sir."

The detective rose and stepped toward the door. As he did so, he saw the colonel glance at his watch. The action made the officer more anxious to go, and his anxiety will be made plain as our narrative progresses.

A deep game of some kind was being played. The detective had made a most thrilling discovery, as intimated, and he was anxious to leave that house.

Once outside, he hurried to the spot where he had left his horse, mounted, and rode away.

Meantime, while the detective had been holding his interview with the colonel, a most startling scene was in progress at the home of Leon Embre.

Half an hour after the departure of the detective from Embre's house, there had come a ring at the outer door. A servant answered the summons, and, returning, announced that a gentleman wished to see his master.

"Who is the gentleman?"

"He did not give his name, sir."

"Nor state his business?"

"No, sir."

"What sort of a looking man is he?"

"I can not tell, sir. He is enveloped in a great cloak, and his head and face are covered with a slouched hat."

Leon Embre remembered the warning of the detective: "Do not walk alone, and admit no strangers into your house." The young man, however, was a brave young fellow, and he determined not to heed the warning. To the servant, who was his valet, he said:

"Go and tell the man it is late. Ask him his business."

The servant went to the door bearing the message, when the stranger wrote a few words upon a card and said:

"Give that to your master."

The servant took the card, and returned to his master.

The card read as follows.

"Do not refuse to see me. I have important information for you, which will atone for my disturbing you at such an hour."

"A FRIEND."

Leon told the servant to show the man into the library.

The servant did as he was directed, and was leaving the room, when the stranger approached from behind and clapped a handkerchief to the man's mouth and nostrils. The

servant fell back insensible, when the cloaked stranger bound and gagged him and dragged him into an adjoining room, and returned to the library to await the appearance of the master of the house.

The binding and gagging of the servant had been quickly and adroitly performed.

Leon Embre entered the room, and said:

"You have some important information for me?"

"I have," came the answer; and, when Leon heard the voice, a pallor overspread his face, and he fixed his eyes keenly on the man who stood with his arms crossed and the slouched hat drawn closely down over his face.

"I am prepared to receive your communication."

"You do not recognize me?" said the strange visitor.

Leon Embre remained silent, when the stranger threw back his slouched hat and disclosed the stern, hard face of Col. Zara!

CHAPTER XI.

LEON EMBRE did not betray any surprise when the colonel disclosed his identity.

"I have come to meet you face to face, Leon Embre!"

"I see you come as a foe, therefore I can not bid you welcome. And now, sir, what is the nature of the information you have announced that you possess?"

"I come to talk of Rose."

"Well, sir?"

"Where is the poor dear child?"

"Where is she, sir?"

"Yes, where is she?"

"I thought you came to impart information, not to seek it."

"I came here to demand my ward at your hands!"

"Would to Heaven I could say she were here; and, as you speak so plainly, I also will speak plainly. I believe that were it not for you, she would be here at this moment, my wedded wife."

"If it had not been for me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Aha! I have forced you to an admission! Wicked stories have been circulated about me. I suspected you from the first as the author of them, and now you so proclaim yourself. But you can not cover up your own crime by circulating evil stories, sir, about me!"

"Colonel Zara, are you here to ruthlessly provoke me?"

"I am; and I am here also to denounce you."

"You will compel me to order you to quit my house!"

"And I should not obey you. No, no, assassin; you are unmasked! What have you done with the body of your victim?"

"Colonel Zara, if I did not believe you to be a villain I should think you had gone mad!"

"This morning you insulted me!"

"Did I?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"By casting a doubt upon my word."

"I can not help it if you took my words as an insult; I spoke what I believed to be the truth."

"And I am here to demand satisfaction!"

"What sort of satisfaction do you seek, sir?"

"That which obtains between gentlemen. I would be justified in shooting you down like a dog; but, murderer or abductor, I propose to give you a chance for your life, and I am here to avenge my honor!"

Leon Embre laughed in a satirical manner.

"Are you armed, sir?" demanded Col. Zara.

"I am unarmed."

The colonel placed two revolvers upon the table, and in a stern voice, said:

"Select one!"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"I mean that you shall fight me!"

"Without witnesses?"

"Yes, without witnesses."

"This is preposterous, sir; the victor would be arrested as a murderer."

"You are a murderer!"

"Hold your insults!"

"I came here to insult, to force you to give me an opportunity to avenge the abduction or murder of my ward!"

Leon Embre had been especially warned by the detective not to denounce Col. Zara. Wayne had his own reasons for issuing the command.

"Sir, I am not the murderer or the abductor of Rose Richland, and you know it! She was to have been my bride and your—"

Leon stopped short. He was not to speak his suspicions.

"And what, sir?" demanded the colonel fiercely.

"You have no right to insinuate that she is missing through any designs of mine."

"We waste time."

"You are at liberty to retire."

The colonel advanced to the library table and placed his hand on one of the revolvers.

"Choose one," he said, "we will settle this matter as becomes gentlemen."

"Are you determined to force me to fight you?"

"I am."

"Sir, if you wish to challenge me, I will meet you, but let us do it in the usual manner; we must have witnesses."

"No, sir, I do not wish it known that I deigned to challenge a man of your character; besides, there are other reasons why we should not have any witnesses."

"I will not ask whether or not you really believe in your own mind that I had anything to do with the disappearance of Rose. You already know better."

"I recognize the charge conveyed in your declarations and demand that you select a pistol."

Leon Embre was no coward; indeed, had he consulted his inclination alone he would have grasped one of the pistols at once, but he did not wish to precipitate the tragedy at that moment.

"I decline, sir, to fight under the circumstances."

"You decline to fight?"

"I do."

"You are a mean, calumnious coward."

"At some future time, if you seek satisfaction at my hands, I will be ready to accept your challenge."

"No, sir; you will fight me to-night!"

"You are mad!"

"Listen. I offer you a chance. Defend yourself, or I will shoot you dead in your tracks!"

Leon Embre had no notion of being murdered in cold blood.

"You drive me to this?"

"I do; I accept all responsibility."

Leon stepped to the table to grasp one of the pistols, when the colonel raised his pistol. Murder shone in the glitter of his eye; his pretense to make it a duel was but a trick. He had entered that room resolved to commit a murder.

Leon Embre did not recognize his danger. Ah instant, and he would have been a corpse; but there came a thrilling interruption. The door of the room flew open; Billy Wayne rushed in with his arms upraised, exclaiming:

"Hold, gentlemen! Let there be no bloodshed!"

A curse fell from the lips of Col. Zara, and his face turned deadly pale. He lowered his weapon. He evidently did not know whether the detective had detected his infamous design or not.

Billy Wayne fixed his eyes upon the colonel, and in a tone of feigned surprise, said:

"What! you here, colonel?"

"I am here!" came the response, in a suppressed tone of voice.

"Why, sir, this is marvelous!" said the detective. "I just left you, as I supposed, at your own house."

The colonel answered, coolly:

"Have you been to my house?"

"I was there by appointment."

"Ah, yes, I believe I did ask you to come."

"And were you gentlemen about to engage in a combat?"

"We were," answered the colonel.

"What does it mean? You two of all men ought to be good friends under all the present terrible circumstances."

The colonel, as has been stated, was a man of ready resource and of iron nerve. He perceived that through some accident his real plan had been defeated, but he was equal to the occasion.

"We are not friends; Mr. Embre has grossly insulted me to my face, and he has insulted me through gross insinuations, which he has caused to take the form of rumor."

Leon stood silent; the time had not arrived for him to speak.

"I came here," continued the colonel, "to seek the satisfaction one gentleman owes to another. I had taken Leon Embre to be a man

of courage; I find him, in truth, to be a coward, a vile slanderer, a villain!"

"Hold, colonel, you are using strong terms!"

"That young man who has boasted off of his courage and skill as a marksman, knows that I am calling him as he deserves."

"Leon, will you leave me alone with the colonel a few moments?" said the detective.

Leon left the room, and a change came over the demeanor of Billy Wayne.

CHAPTER XII.

THE colonel evidently did not like the idea of remaining alone with the detective, and he saw trouble ahead when he recognized the change that came over the face of Wayne.

"Colonel, what was your game?" asked Billy Wayne, in a stern voice.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"No need to beat around the bush, colonel; you and I understand each other."

"Sir, you are addressing a gentleman—be careful how you speak."

"I am responsible for anything I may say."

A sudden murderous impulse came over Col. Zara. He feared the detective, and he had come to perceive that there was good reason for his fear. The detective out of the way, he would easily, as he thought, deal with Leon Embre. It was but the raising of the arm, a slight pressure of a finger, and Billy Wayne the detective would roll dead at his feet, and he would be safe. He took his resolution. He would do it, and he was about raising his weapon suddenly to perform the bloody deed, when there sounded in his ear the warning words:

"Hold on, colonel, I've got you covered! Don't raise your arm!"

The detective had read the man's purpose in his glittering eyes.

Col. Zara did not raise his arm. The pressure of the finger did not follow.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean just what I said a moment ago—we understand each other. I have dealt with just such men before."

"I will not remain to listen to such insulting language."

"Yes, you will," came the retort in a quiet but determined tone.

"How dare you, sir?"

"It is not a question of dare, Colonel Zara, simply because as far as dare is concerned I dare do anything. Between you and me, sir, it is a matter of business. Your little trick has given me the right to talk to you as I please."

"You will suffer for this language."

"Very well, when the time comes for me to suffer I will meet my punishment like a man; but in the meantime, colonel, will you please explain to me the mystery?"

"What mystery, sir?"

"The mystery of your presence here."

"There is no mystery attending my presence here. I elected to visit Leon Embre, and here I am."

"But, sir, you requested me to call and see you; I called. It is not an hour since I left you in your own library, and now I find you here. I demand, sir, that you explain the mystery."

"I repeat there is no mystery to explain."

"Do you know, sir, with whom you are dealing?"

"I do not care who you are. You may claim to be a detective, but you have no right to cross-examine me as to my movements. If I chose to meet you in my library and then by rapid riding anticipate your presence here, my movements concern you not."

"Under certain circumstances your movements do not concern me, but when you resort to a trick to cover the tracks of a would-be murderer, your movements do concern me."

"Sir!" ejaculated the colonel.

"I mean just what I say, sir."

"You dare insinuate that I contemplated a murder?"

"I dare insinuate that, had I not opportunely entered this room as I did, you would have killed Leon Embre?"

"In fair combat."

"The man who leaves a double to personate him, while he steals forth to kill a neighbor, has no idea of acting fairly! Come, come, colonel, it is as well for you to know that I am up to a part of your scheme."

"It's false?"

"Who was the man who personated you, sir?"

"No man personated me."

"I met a man at your house within an hour who claimed to be Colonel Zara. He resembled you."

"Sir, I can not be made answerable for any blunder of your own."

"I've made no blunder. I discovered the trick the moment I entered the presence of your double, and I hastened back here."

"You must be crazy; you are talking in riddles to me!"

The detective laughed in a satirical manner, and answered:

"Come, come, colonel, let's get right down to plain talk. You invited me to your house, and you had a person there to personate you. I tumbled to the scheme, and I am here! Now sir, will you please explain?"

"I have no explanations to make. I do not pretend to solve riddles."

"Very well, sir; there is no need to continue the conversation. But let me warn you, I am for the present the custodian of young Mr. Embre; I hold myself responsible for his safety."

"Your language is so ridiculous, I am at a loss to make answer."

"We understand each other, colonel."

"You will be called upon to answer for all your insults."

"I am prepared to answer at any time. And now, colonel, let me tell you that you also will be called upon to answer for your acts. I am on your track!"

"You are on my track?"

"Yes."

"For what purpose?"

"To discover the whereabouts of Miss Richland."

"And you are on my track for that purpose?"

"I am."

"You are hunting the wrong man. I also am searching for my ward."

"Are you searching for the living or the dead?"

"The living."

"Thank you, colonel. Let me tell you. I know that Miss Richland is living at this moment. The lake scheme was a good one; but I shall hold you to account for the safety of the girl from this time out."

The colonel had paled a little, but during the whole conversation had maintained a firm attitude.

Colonel Zara was terribly uneasy, however, and had he not been a man of many resources he would have been "knocked out," as the phrase is; but, as intimated in a preceding chapter, he was a set and determined man; and having once started in to carry out his conspiracy, he would not be stopped by any event short of absolute defeat—and to him defeat meant ruin, and possibly disgrace and death; consequently he was in for a long and bitter fight.

The colonel had already discerned that his scheme was suspected, and he recognized that the man he had most to fear was the detective; and, in his own mind, he resolved that the detective's term of usefulness should be brief in the land of the living.

The colonel was cool, and he spoke in a steady tone, as he said:

"I begin to perceive that Leon Embre is even a greater scoundrel than I at first was led to believe him to be. His conspiracy is a deeper one than I had anticipated. But let him proceed; he will learn that two can play at the game he has so tragically inaugurated."

Again the detective smiled, as he said:

"Colonel, I see we are beginning to acknowledge a mutual understanding. You are indeed a game man; but stop right here. Save yourself, and all will be well. There is now an opportunity to withdraw from your purpose without facing the contingency of ruin and disgrace."

"You have the advantage at present, sir—you can insult me at your will; but my time will come. You shall repent your words."

"All right, colonel, I see you are determined to persist. You will not be warned; but let me ask you one question; who was it that personated you? Is he the man who witnessed the tragedy of the lake?"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE colonel had settled down for the full play, and he answered:

"I am now prepared for any sort of charge, for any wild statement. I met you in my lib-

rary, and as to the tragedy at the lake, I refer you to your co-conspirator, Leon Embre."

"Didn't it strike you as strange, colonel, that no body was found in the lake? You certainly had reason to expect a different result?"

The colonel tried hard to avoid a betrayal of his agitation, but he failed. The mystery of the disappearance of the body was a mystery that haunted his soul.

After a moment Col. Zara said:

"It is not necessary for us to continue this conversation; you have warned me, I will take the liberty of warning you. There is now a chance for you to withdraw from this conspiracy, and it you will aid me, come over to the right side, and you shall earn a fortune."

"Very nicely put, colonel, very nicely; but I prefer to abide in the conspiracy, as you call it. You have well said there is no use for us to talk. I demand Miss Richland at your hands, and woe betide you or any of your confederates if in due time the beautiful girl is not produced unharmed and unscathed."

The colonel drew his cloak about him and moved toward the door.

"You are determined to be arrayed against me?"

"I am."

"You will take the eventual consequences?"

"I will."

"Good-night, sir."

"Good-night."

The colonel withdrew from the room and a moment later Leon Embre entered followed by his valet, Victor.

The detective closely questioned the valet, and learned all the incidents attending Col. Zara's entrance into the house. Leon Embre also related the incidents of his own interview with the colonel.

When the narratives were concluded, Billy Wayne said:

"The real business now begins; the colonel knows his danger, and he is a dangerous man to contend against; and you, sir," he added, addressing Leon, "must recognize your own danger, and in future follow my directions."

"I obeyed your commands to-night, sir, but it was a hard task; had I followed my own judgment, Col. Zara would not have been permitted to insult me as he did!"

"You would have fought him?"

"Yes."

"And you would have been killed."

"My chances would have been as good as the colonel's. I am expert with weapons."

"Nevertheless you would have been killed; see here!"

The colonel had retired, leaving the pistol he had produced on the table. The detective raised the weapon which had been assigned to Leon Embre, and discharged it; there came an explosion, but no bullet was ejected from the muzzle.

Leon Embre gazed in blank amazement, and after an interval exclaimed:

"He intended to murder me?"

"That was indeed his purpose, sir."

"I did not believe him capable of so cowardly a trick!"

"You forget the circumstance of the body recovered from the lake?"

"Ah, indeed, I have now the worst to anticipate—Rose is dead!"

"You believe she is murdered?"

"I do."

"I am willing to let you think so until after I have done my work."

"You will search for the dead, and that man shall be brought to justice?"

"No, I shall not search for the dead; I believe Rose Richland lives."

"Where can she be concealed?"

"That is for me to discover."

"And I will aid you, sir."

"I do not need your aid. All I ask you to do is, guard your own life."

"You need not fear for me."

The detective tapped the discharged weapon, and said, in a significant tone:

"No, I need not fear but you can take care of yourself; still, had I not arrived as I did, you would be a dead man now."

"You are right; but how can one guard against such deep and murderous treachery?"

"You must be continually on your guard. Admit no strangers to your house; do not permit strangers to follow you on your grounds. Indeed, with your permission, I will send a detective to reside in your house until we have run the colonel to earth."

It was late at night when the parties retired to rest.

On the following morning the detective held a long consultation with Leon Embre, and departed.

Our hero was very particular in his commands and directions, and closed his admonitions with the remark:

"Now, sir, you must not underrate the importance of what I tell you. Abide by my directions, and I promise you that I will find Rose Richland and restore her to you."

"You will never find her alive."

"I will; and, mark me, if you permit, the colonel to taunt you into a quarrel he will gain his purpose, and all my efforts, as far as you are concerned, will go for naught."

"I will attend to your words."

Late that same afternoon, a quiet, gentlemanly looking elderly man presented himself at the Embre mansion; and, after his card had been submitted to the young master, he was admitted to the house. And so the day passed; night came, and a strange-looking man, followed by a magnificent blood-hound, might have been seen moving along under the starlight, with stealthy steps, across the grounds of Col. Zara.

The man looked like an Indian, and his apparel was a combination of the red man and the cowboy. Long black hair streamed down upon his shoulders. His complexion was tawny, and his whole appearance was that of a semi-civilized savage.

The man took his dog close to the mansion, and started him off upon a scent.

The animal was one of the finest specimens of his breed, and had been as carefully trained as any dog that ever started upon a trail.

The dog went carefully about his business and the master followed him, but the scent appeared to prove a failure.

An hour passed, and it was midnight when the master led the dog off toward a grove of trees.

"Lie down, Bruno," said the Indian, and the dog lay down. The master stood a moment lost in thought, and then with stealthy tread moved toward the mansion.

Round and round the house the strange man walked, until at length he appeared to decide upon his course of action, and with the agility of a monkey he climbed one of the columns supporting the broad piazza surrounding the house, and once on the roof he crawled toward an end window.

The man was very deliberate in all his movements, and stopped ever and anon to listen, but at length he opened the blinds, raised the sash and crawled into the house.

The window opened into a broad hall. All was dark, and the man stood a moment listening, but after an interval he drew a mask lantern from his pocket, and let the bright light shoot forward; the light revealed the way. The mask was closed, and the strange man moved forward, evidently depending upon his memory.

Soon he reached the door of a room. His ear was placed to the key hole and a moment he listened, and then muttered, "It's all right."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE strange man had evidently prepared himself for his clandestine visit to the home of Col. Zara, as he drew an instrument from his pocket and opened the room door as readily as though provided with a key.

Once in the room, the man glanced carefully around, having once more slid the mask of his lantern. The room was elegantly furnished, and had evidently been the sleeping apartment of a young lady, though at the moment the bed was unoccupied.

The intruder's feet were incased in moccasins, and he moved around with noiseless tread, making a complete and thorough search in every nook and corner, every drawer and closet; indeed, his search occupied a full hour, and when it was over, he picked from the floor in one of the closets a small slipper, a lady's shoe, which he concealed upon his person with the muttered remark:

"Something for you, Bruno, old boy!"

Having secured the dainty little slipper, the man stole from the room with as noiseless tread as he had entered, and moved rapidly toward the great staircase. Again he stood and listened.

A light was dimly burning in the great hall below, and objects were indistinctly revealed.

Boldly the intruder descended the stairs, when the sound of voices fell upon his ear. The voices came from the direction of the library, and the midnight roamer passed along and took up a position at the door. Bending down, he peeped through the key-hole, and beheld three men seated around the library table.

One mystery was solved. The singular incident of the colonel and his double was explained; the two colonels were in the room, and Billy Wayne readily settled in his own mind the identity of the two men.

"So far, so good!" muttered the detective; and he added: "Now we will learn what they are talking about."

There were, as stated, three men in the room—the colonel, a man who personally resembled the colonel, and a third party—a rough, fierce-looking man, whose face indicated a readiness to commit any crime, no matter how villainous.

"Bush," said the colonel, just as the detective, disguised as a half-breed Indian, placed his ear to the key-hole, "you can do me a great service."

"I am always ready to serve you, colonel, when we can come to terms, and you must admit I have served you well during the last few days."

"I don't know about that!"

"The girl is safe."

"Where?"

"You know what my instructions were."

The detective glanced into the room, and saw a shadow fall over the face of the colonel.

"You may have misunderstood my instructions."

"No, sir."

"Where is the girl?"

"I would not advise you to inquire too closely, colonel. I carried out my instructions."

A cold chill passed over the frame of the detective. The villain's words were ominous, and suggestive of a terrible crime.

The colonel appeared ill at ease, but he said:

"Tell me the truth, Bush."

"I carried out my instructions, sir; the girl will never rise up in judgment against you, and you will remember you said to me, 'Bush, I do not desire that she should ever rise up in judgment against me.' Colonel, *she never will!*"

The man spoke in a tone of terrible significance.

"I still fear that you misunderstood my instructions."

"We will talk of that, sir, when we come to make a final settlement; but one thing is certain, the young lady is *silenced forever*. And now we will talk over this new duty you have for me."

"The girl is silenced?"

"Forever."

"You know Leon Embre?"

"I do."

"Well?" the colonel uttered the exclamation interrogatively.

"You wish young Embre silenced?"

"He stands in my way."

"It is a risky job, colonel; more risky than the other."

"Why so?"

The man lowered his voice, and said:

"Colonel, something has gone wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"Where is the body that was cast into the lake?"

"Ah, you dare refer to that matter?"

"Certainly; why not?"

"You deceived me there."

"How so?"

"Nothing was found in the lake."

"And there comes the mystery, colonel; what became of what was cast into the lake?"

"Will you swear something was cast in the lake?"

"I will."

The colonel was thoughtful a moment, but after an interval he said:

"Bush, I wish you would tell me the truth."

"I have told you the truth, sir."

"It can not be possible."

"Yes, sir."

"At what hour did you cast *something* into the lake?"

"At nine o'clock."

"On the wedding night?"

"Yes."

"And at daylight the dragging commenced and nothing was found."

"Yes, sir; and that is something I do not understand."

"It must have been removed."

"Yes, sir."

"Who could have removed it?"

"There's the mystery, colonel."

"Have you a theory?"

"No, sir; I am at a loss to account for the disappearance of the body from the lake."

"You had confederates to aid you?"

"Yes, sir."

"They have sold you out."

"Never! I am as sure of the men who aided me as I am that I stand in your presence at this moment."

"That is a mystery that ought to be solved."

"Yes, sir; but how about Embre?"

"He must be silenced—yes, silenced at all hazards!"

"It's risky business, colonel; we ought to wait awhile."

"Why wait?"

"The disappearance of two prominent persons in such quick succession will excite extraordinary suspicions."

"That can not be helped. That man must be silenced."

"But can not you wait a few weeks?"

"No."

"Trouble will come; and the investigation of the second mystery will cause more positive investigation of the first one."

"I care not. He must be silenced."

"And then you are done?"

"No."

"What, another?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"A detective."

The man, Bush, uttered a low whistle.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "I see where the dog is coming through the brush."

"What do you mean?"

"You say there is a detective in the case?"

"Yes."

"Against you?"

"Yes."

"Have you seen him?"

"Yes."

"When did he appear on the scene?"

"I saw him first on the morning when we were dragging the Merc."

"Did you speak with him?"

"Not then."

"Later on?"

"Yes."

"Ah! let me see. Does he *suspect you*, colonel?"

"I can not tell; but he is a dangerous man."

"Colonel, who is he?"

"Billy Wayne."

CHAPTER XV.

AT the mention of the name of Billy Wayne, the man Bush uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"Billy Wayne in this case?"

"Yes!"

"Against you?"

"Yes."

"Colonel, it's bad."

"Bah! who is he more than any other man?"

"I'll tell you who he is; I'd rather have Satan himself on my track!"

"He has but one life."

"But one life?"

"Yes."

"Well, that may be so, but it will take forty lives to get away with his one. He is a man we can't down."

"You're a coward, Bush!"

"No, colonel, I am no coward; but I tell you Billy Wayne is a terrible man to buck against. I tell you I'd rather have the devil himself on my track!"

"Bush, you've had a run of hard luck lately."

"Yes, colonel."

"You need money?"

"I do."

"It's worth ten thousand dollars to me to have what I want."

"Embre and Wayne?"

"Yes."

"We would have to drop on Wayne first."

"Why so?"

"He is engaged in the service of Embre?"

"Yes."

"Very well, if Embre were out of the way we could never get the bulge on Wayne; that man must be taken unaware or never, and should we drop out Embre, he would know his black ticket had been given out, and he'd be on the eternal 'lay' for all of us."

"He must be silenced."
 "And you will pay ten thousand?"
 "Yes."
 "It's big money."
 "It is indeed large pay for the service. Will you undertake the job?"
 "I will never let such a chance go by; but I tell you I wish it were any other man. I'd rather it were the Governor of the State of Missouri."
 "Wayne is the man I want."
 "I will think the matter over."
 "There is no time for thinking."
 "Ah! I've decided to take the job. All I mean is, I must think of a plan to get the 'bulge' on Wayne."
 "I can suggest a plan."
 "All right; what's your racket?"
 "Does Wayne know you?"
 "I have not the honor of his personal acquaintance; but I flatter myself he has heard of me."
 "He does not know you personally?"
 "No."
 "Then it's all right. Seek him out. Tell him you can give him a 'point' on the missing girl. Lead him to your rendezvous, and you will then know what to do."
 "Very pretty business, colonel; but it's evident you never have had any dealings with Billy Wayne. Why, that man would go through such a scheme so quick, you'd never think he had had time to wink!"
 "Is he so smart?"
 "He is."
 "It must be done."
 "Yes, it must be done without fail, but not by any such transparent scheme as that."
 "Have you a plan?"
 "I might think of one."
 "Let us hear your plan."
 "I must have time to think."
 "Well, think."
 "Now?"
 "Yes."
 "Why such haste?"
 "You have led me to believe that it is necessary to work at once; if Wayne is such a wonderful man, at any moment he may get some point on us."
 "That's so, colonel, I see now that you begin to appreciate Billy Wayne, and if the job is to be done we must act at once."
 "We have not even a moment to spare, Bush."
 The outlaw Bush was thoughtful for a moment, but at length he said:
 "Could you get him here, colonel?"
 "Who?"
 "Billy Wayne."
 "I might."
 "It could be done that way possibly."
 "How?"
 "You get him here. I will know when he is to be on hand. I'd have a few of the gang resting around under the trees, and the thing might be done as he walked or rode by."
 "It may be accomplished."
 "The only way to do it, colonel."
 "Then it all depends upon our getting him here?"
 "Yes."
 The colonel was thoughtful a moment.
 "I don't like the plan," he said.
 "Why not?"
 "It would happen on my grounds."
 "Yes."
 "Risky."
 "It's a risky job at best, colonel; indeed it's a risky job anyhow, but—"

The man stopped.
 "What would you say?"
 "If Billy Wayne keeps hanging round, it's all up with you."
 "How so?"
 "I am not into the details of your scheme, colonel; you know I am a man who don't care about your plans so long as you come down and see me all right, but I tell you, Billy Wayne is a terror. He will go through all your game, if he lives."
 "I do not fear him; but it will be more convenient if he were not in the way."
 "I should say so, colonel, and it's going to be a tough job. How deep is he in your scheme?"
 "I don't know."
 "How long has he been on the case?"
 "I don't know."
 "Things have a bad look, colonel. I'd like to pick up your ten thousand, but if you know

any other man who will take the job, I'm willing to pass."
 "You suit me, Bush."
 "I tell you, colonel, matters have a bad look. I begin to 'smell a mouse' already."
 "How so?"
 "The body from the Mere."
 "Well?"
 "It's two to one Billy Wayne was the fisherman."
 The detective who was a listener to the whole of the foregoing conversation, had his eye to the key-hole. He saw that the colonel turned deadly pale.
 "Do you mean to say that he dragged the body from the Mere?"
 "The body was put there?"
 "Yes."
 "At nine o'clock at night?"
 "Yes."
 "The next morning, when the Mere was dragged, the body was gone?"
 "Yes."
 "Billy Wayne was present when the dragging took place?"
 "Yes."
 "It's his game."
 "I do not understand."
 "It's as plain as A B C. Billy Wayne was there ahead of you!"
 "How could he have known of the deed?"
 "You can find a hundred and fifty men who were convicted by him, and they will ask the same question. I tell you the man is a devil. How he gets points, no one knows, but he gets 'em all the same, and it's wonderful the way he does it, sir!"
 "You think he has the body?"
 "Yes."
 "Why did he not let out his secret?"
 The man Bush laughed and said:
 "Ah, he's got his own way of working, but he's an awful man to bring on a ghost at the right moment."

CHAPTER XVI.

BILLY WAYNE was proud to listen to the testimony to his shrewdness and daring from this man Bush. The latter was mistaken in one particular, the detective did know the scoundrel by sight, and had long been waiting for a chance to get the dead wood on the villain.
 The suggestion of the man sent a cold chill to the heart of Colonel Zara; the colonel had never for a moment suspected the possibility of the body having been taken from the Mere by any one. He had concluded, when the dragging proved a failure, that his confederate had failed to put the body there, and when the suggestion came, as stated, his soul was filled with terror.
 After a long interval of deep thought he said:
 "Bush, I have offered you ten thousand dollars to get this man out of the way."
 "Yes, sir."
 "I will double the amount."
 "Your offer is a great temptation."
 "It must be done."
 "I have opened up a plan, colonel."
 "Can you think of no other plan?"
 "I can not."
 "I must get him here?"
 "Yes."
 "Do you think I can?"
 "That is for you to decide."
 "I will try; but listen, can it not be arranged so that the work can be done off my premises?"
 "We can not take any chances, colonel."
 "I will communicate with you to-morrow, Bush; meantime, have your men ready."
 "They are always ready."
 "It will not be necessary to let them know who the man is."
 "I would not dare tell them."
 "You would not dare tell them?"
 "No."
 "Why not?"
 "They would go back on me. I tell you, the very name of Billy Wayne is a terror; they'd rather run in on some other chance."
 "Wayne is the man, Bush."
 "I will do the best I can, colonel; but it's a big chance against us, even as we have arranged it."
 "There can be no failure if I get him."
 "Oh, yes, there can!"
 "How?"
 "Well, you can never tell how Billy Wayne may take a thing; a good deal depends upon how you manage to get him here. The man is always on the alert, always suspicious, and

should he tumble to the game, there would follow some lively business."
 "And he is such an extraordinary man?"
 "Yes."
 "I wish I had known it two weeks ago."
 "You would have engaged him?"
 "Yes."
 "Never. He is one of the most honest men on the face of the earth, and no money would get him into a crooked scheme."
 "It's too late to try him on now?"
 "Yes, sir; but we may succeed. The chances are heavy, but it may be done."
 "I will communicate with you."
 "When?"
 "As soon as I have had a chance to arrange my plans."
 "You must go very slow, colonel."
 "I will go slow, but the scheme must go through."
 The man Bush rose to take his departure, and Billy Wayne glided from before the library door.
 The detective through a fortunate chance was once more prepared to give a gang of villains one of his wonderful surprises, as Bush had admitted he had got the "bulge" on them many times in the past.
 The detective did not leave the house. He had a little business to do beneath that roof. He only got out of the way in order to permit the man Bush to pass out. The detective saw the fellow come forth, and watched him pass from the house, when he returned to his position at the library door. He calculated that the "twins" would exchange a few private words, and as the event proved his calculations were correct.
 The "twins" were alone; the suggestion contained in the term twins, was a solution of the mystery of the two colonels.
 As the sequel proved, the colonel had a twin brother, a fact that was not generally known, even among his most intimate friends; his twin brother was as big a scoundrel as himself, and for reasons of their own they had concealed the fact of their striking resemblance, one of them adopting a perfect disguise, but when the need arose, they made the most of their personal resemblance, and it was always for the carrying out of some wicked scheme.
 When it was needed, one of the brothers would be the colonel and the other would be the brother, and they had hit upon the game of doubles for the present emergency. The scheme was a deep one. There was a possibility that suspicion would point toward the colonel; but the latter would prove an alibi, and his witness would be Billy Wayne, the detective, who would be compelled to swear that he was talking to the colonel in the latter's house at the time the murder was committed.
 Billy Wayne, as our readers know, had "tumbled" to the scheme; and his quickness of perception had been followed by the saving of a life.
 When the brothers were alone, for a moment silence prevailed; but, after an interval, the colonel said:
 "Well, Tom, what do you think of it?"
 "It is as Bush said—things look bad."
 "Do you believe it possible that the body was dropped into the lake?"
 "I believe the body was dropped into the lake."
 "I thought the non-finding of the body was evidence of a scheme on the part of Bush."
 "No. There is no doubt the body was dropped into the lake."
 "Then Leon Embre is a more dangerous man than I ever took him to be."
 "He is no fool. He has proved too many for you so far."
 "What could they have done with the body?"
 "Preserved it."
 The colonel gave a start.
 "By all that's strange, it would be a smart scheme!"
 "You can make up your mind that if they have the body you will see a ghost some day, unless—"
 "Unless what?"
 "Unless the plan is carried out."
 "It must be done."
 "You bet it must be done."
 "And you must aid me, Tom."
 "I will go up or down with you."
 "Do you think the fellow Bush is reliable?"
 "I do; remember the man talked fair. He did not blow or swagger. He just told you the simple truth. He said it was a hard game."

"Tom, do you think it possible to buy this man Wayne?"

"You remember what Bush said."

"I do not mean to buy him on, but buy him off."

"Get him to stand off and let the game work without him?"

"Yes."

"I do not believe it can be done."

"Can you manage the other matter?"

"Get him here?"

"Yes."

"I can try."

"Will you?"

"Yes."

At that moment there came a most startling interruption to the conversation of the two brothers; there came a voice saying: "*A good scheme!*"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE two schemers upon hearing the voice started and both turned pale, while they glanced around in every direction.

"Tom," said the colonel, "did you hear a voice?"

"Yes."

"What it did it say?"

"*A good scheme!*"

The men were amazed; they drew their weapons, for both always carried concealed weapons, and they passed from the room. No one was to be seen; they commenced a thorough search of the house, but not a living soul save the servants who were all in their beds was discovered.

Half an hour the men spent in a search inside and outside of the house, but the search proved a failure.

The brothers returned to the library.

"Tom," said the colonel, "what does it mean?"

"I'll be hanged as high as Haman if I can tell!"

"We certainly heard a voice."

"We did."

"We heard the words '*a good scheme!*'"

"We did."

"Some one must have been listening?"

"Certainly."

"Some one who comprehended our purpose?"

"Yes."

"And this occurred in our own house?"

"Yes."

"It is not possible we were deceived?"

"It is not possible we were deceived," repeated Tom.

"The party must be around somewhere."

"Most assuredly."

"We must find him."

"We ought to find him."

"He will be lurking around somewhere?"

"Most likely."

"I will go and get my rifle, you wait here."

With a determined look upon his face, the colonel left the room.

In a few moments he returned, and the two men left the house and started for the stables, where a hound was unleashed.

Meantime Billy Wayne had secured all the "points" he needed for the time being, and after dropping the mysterious words, he passed from the house, and proceeded to the place where he had left his dog.

The animal had lain in one spot during the whole time his master had been away.

The detective was greatly disappointed. He had hoped to trail for the living. He had entered the mansion for that purpose, having indulged a suspicion that Rose Richland was somewhere concealed in the house. He had thought over the matter, weighed well all the evidence, and could not satisfy himself that upon the night of her disappearance she had been taken from the house, but when he heard the strange words of the man Bush, he was led to fear that the beautiful girl had been really murdered.

Again he could not reconcile his mind concerning the mystery of the body taken from the lake.

As he joined his dog, he held the slipper to the animal's nose, and said:

"Now, then, Bruno, old boy, let's see what you think about it."

The dog sniffed the slipper, walked away as though revolving the matter in his mind, returned, took another sniff, and then settled down with his nose between his two paws.

"Well, old boy, what do you think of it?"

The animal wagged his tail, looked up into

his master's face, and remained, as a matter of course, silent.

"I reckon, old boy, it will be a hard task for us; but come, we will see."

The detective moved toward the house, his hound following behind, and a long time passed. Billy Wayne walked round and round the house, seemingly in an aimless manner; but he knew what he was up to, and soon the object of his little loitering around was betrayed. He had returned to the spot where he had first left his dog, and stood leaning against a tree, when suddenly the dog uttered a low growl.

"Aha! just as I thought," muttered the detective; and in a low tone he said to the faithful beast:

"Lie down, Bruno—keep silent, old fellow!"

An instant passed, and a hound dashed up and made a spring at the detective. Billy Wayne was a regular policeman; he carried always a locust with him. One blow, and the hound lay quivering at his feet, and with two more blows the animal was dead.

"Now come, Bruno, old boy!"

The detective moved away, followed by his dog, and took a position from whence he could command a view of the dead animal.

Half an hour passed, and he saw two figures cautiously approaching. He recognized the colonel and his brother.

The men drew near, and reached the spot where the dead hound lay.

Oaths fell from the lips of both men, and the colonel exclaimed:

"The dog is dead!"

"Dead as a door-nail!"

"Tom, this is wonderful!"

"Colonel, it is marvelous!"

"Some one killed the dog, Tom."

"Certainly; he did not die a natural death."

"What shall we do?"

"What can we do?"

"This is terrible, Tom!"

The two men were cold with apprehension; the death of the dog under ordinary circumstances would have been but a simple matter, but under the existing circumstances it was ominous indeed.

A moment they stood over the warm carcass, but at length the colonel said:

"Tom, that man Bush told the truth."

"He did."

"This fellow Wayne is indeed the devil."

"Do you think it is he?"

"Who else could it be?"

"We must find him."

The search was renewed, but what could they do without their hound?

Round and round the two men traveled, guns in hand, until the day dawned, but their search was fruitless.

Meantime Billy Wayne had accomplished his purpose; the man was playing a scheme the purpose of which will be revealed as our narrative advances.

It was dawn when the detective in his ordinary attire appeared at the door of Leon Embre's house. Leon was up and around and gladly welcomed the detective.

The two men held a long talk.

"Leon," said our hero, "you must tell me where you and Rose were accustomed to walk."

The young man made a map of the Richland place, and indicated the usual haunts of the fair girl when taking her daily walks.

The detective remained fully an hour with Leon, and went forth. Some two hours later, an old tin peddler with a mangy-looking hound appeared at the kitchen of the Richland mansion.

The old peddler remained and dickered with the servants for a long time, while the dog wandered around scenting like any other seemingly hungry animal.

But a most singular incident occurred. One of the servants tossed the animal a bone. The hound only sniffed at the bone, and continued his scenting around.

"Golly!" exclaimed the colored girl, "I tought de dog wer' hungry."

"I reckon he smells the track of some sort of animal."

While the peddler and his dog were around, Colonel Zara passed out from the house and walked, for awhile, up and down the balcony. His eyes rested upon the dog, and little did he dream, at that moment, the real secret of the miserable and dirty-looking hound. He also glanced at the peddler, and again little did he dream of the real purpose of the old tin merchant who stood laughing and chatting with the servants.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE dog continued his scent, and the colonel stood gazing at him. At length an idea appeared to seize him, and he walked back to where the peddler sat with his pile of tin around him.

"What breed is that dog?"

"Sir, it's more than I can tell you."

"He looks like a hound."

"Well, sir, he may have some of the blood in him."

"He acts as though he were on a scent."

"I think he is, sir."

"What can he be after?"

"That's more than I can tell, sir."

"Will you sell him?"

"I will, sir."

"Quite cheap, I suppose?"

"Indeed, sir, I'd ask no great price for him."

"Where are you from?"

"The city, sir."

"Are you having good luck?"

"Yes, sir, I'm doin' well to-day, quite well. I sell cheap and the girls like my goods. I think I've sold goods here before."

"Is your dog good on a scent?"

"I should say not, sir, for he's been mousing around here over an hour, and I've not seen that he's made out anything."

The dog had passed around to the side of the house out of sight, and suddenly he uttered a low yelp.

"Hello! What's that?" exclaimed the colonel.

"Nothing, sir," answered the peddler; but there was a strange glitter in the man's eyes as he spoke.

"He must have struck a scent; that was a signal bark."

"Well, I think, sir, it were a false alarm. He were fooling us, for here he comes, and if he had struck a trail of any kind he'd not be coming back here with his tail between his legs."

The colonel eyed the peddler over from head to feet. Colonel Zara was a shrewd man, and a suspicion suddenly flashed across his mind.

"You live in the city?" he said.

"I do."

"And you are in the habit of coming here to sell goods?"

"I have sold goods here before."

The colonel appealed to his servants.

"Do you know this man?"

The minds of servants are easily biased, and they are led a great deal by their imagination, and one of them answered promptly:

"Oh, yes, this man comes here often."

The colonel again cast a look at the hound, which was crouched beside its master.

"You will sell that dog?"

"Yes, I will."

"Will you bring him here to-morrow?"

"Yes, I will."

There was a strange look in the colonel's eye.

"Can I depend upon you?"

"If you wish to buy the dog, I will certainly come."

"Could you come to-night?"

"I could, sir."

"Will you?"

"If you wish me to come to-night, sir, I will."

"I should like to have you come to-night."

"At what hour, sir?"

"Say, nine o'clock."

"I will come, sir."

"Bring the dog."

"Yes, sir. But it's funny, sir, you want me to come at night, with an old hound like that fellow."

"I wish a friend to see the dog. I lost a hound the other day."

"A valuable one, sir?"

"Yes."

"Then this one will not replace him, but I will sell him if you want him."

The colonel walked away, and the peddler remained and dickered with the servants; but at length, when an opportunity offered, he made a signal to his dog. The animal rose and started off on the other side of the house, while the peddler moved toward the great gate leading from the grounds.

Colonel Zara was still seated upon the piazza, and, as the man passed, he called out:

"Where is the dog?"

"I will leave him with you, if you wish, sir."

"You will leave him now?"

"Yes, sir."

"Never mind; bring him along with you to-night."

"All right, sir."

"You will be sure and come?"

"I will be sure and come."

The peddler turned again to go away, when the colonel rose, and, calling the man back, advanced toward him and said:

"You are fooling me."

"Fooling you, sir?"

"Yes."

"How so?"

"You will not come back with the dog."

"Why not, sir?"

"You are afraid."

"Afraid, sir?"

"Yes."

"Why should I be afraid?"

"You know I do not want to buy the dog."

"You said you did, sir."

"I was not in earnest."

"Then I shall not come."

"Yes, you must come."

"And bring the dog?"

"You can do as you have a mind to as to the dog, but I want you to come—I wish to have a talk with you."

"Can you not talk with me now, sir?"

"No, as I want a gentleman present who is not at home now."

"It is strange you should wish to talk with a poor man like me, sir."

"You say you live in the city?"

"Yes, sir."

"You travel around a great deal among all kinds of people?"

"Yes, sir."

"That is all right, you may be of service to me; and if you can serve me, you shall be well paid."

"And I am to be here at nine o'clock?"

"Any time after eight o'clock and before ten."

"I will be on hand, sir."

"If you can not come to-night, to-morrow evening will answer."

"I will come to-night, sir. I am always ready to earn a dollar, and I ain't particular how I earn it."

Again a strange light shone in the colonel's eyes.

"You like to earn a dollar?"

"Yes."

"And you are not particular how you earn it?"

"No, sir."

"What do you mean by that, old man?"

The peddler approached close to the colonel, and said:

"Rich men sometimes have little odd jobs they want performed, and I'm just the man to employ. I tell you I'm not particular what I do to earn a dollar."

"Well, come to night."

"Yes, sir."

"You will come surely?"

"Yes, sir."

The peddler walked away, and as he reached the road he muttered:

"Deep as the devil!" and it was a strange and most singular coincidence that the colonel used similar words as he resumed his seat. Said the colonel:

"That man is lightning, but I've got the bulge on him this time."

Again the peddler muttered:

"He knows me."

And again it was proven that the two minds were running in the same channel, as the colonel muttered.

"He suspects, but I'll beat him on that track."

CHAPTER XIX.

THERE was a deep scheme brewing; both men were steady, nifty operators. The peddler moved along the road, and again muttered:

"Indeed that man is deep, and were it not that I had an inside peep, he'd have me dead to rights; as it is, there will be some lively fun to-night, and Colonel Zara will come to think as his friend Bush thinks, that Billy Wayne is in league with the devil himself."

The detective continued along the road for a short distance, and then stood still and listened, and soon he saw his dog Bruno running toward him.

"Aha, good fellow," said the master, as he patted the dog on the head.

Billy Wayne glanced around in every direction—no one was in sight. He bade the dog lay low, and walked over to a thick clump of brush, and a few moments later the half-breed Indian appeared. The peddler and his tins had most mysteriously disappeared.

"It's all right now, Bruno, old boy," said the detective, and he signaled his dog to move.

Bruno was indeed a wonderful dog; his sagacity in some respects was far superior in results to the intelligence of human beings. The animal retraced his steps and soon went scenting around, and evidently recovered the lost trail, as he uttered his warning bark and started away with his nose to the ground.

Occasionally the hound appeared to be at fault, but in time he always regained the scent, and moved forward about his business.

The scent at length led the animal to the road, and soon he was moving along at quite a rapid rate.

The detective moved along, keeping his hound in sight, and occasionally he would give muttered utterance to his thoughts.

"By George!" he murmured, "we've struck the trail! As sure as I am alive, that dog is making for the haunted tavern!"

The haunted tavern was a hostelry situated in a remote place, far from any surrounding dwellings. A murder had been committed in the place many years previously, and several tenants had deserted the house, all declaring that it was haunted, and that at night strange sights and strange noises were to be seen and heard in the uncanny place.

The haunted tavern, which had originally been merely a residence, had remained tenantless for many years, until one day a German came along and purchased the place and opened a tavern.

The people living round about wondered how the man could make a tavern pay in such a remote, out-of-the-way place; but, as it proved, the German knew his own business, and, without the fear of ghosts or goblins in his mind, thrived in business.

Other rumors soon spread around and it was reported that the place was the resort of gamblers, counterfeiters, horse-thieves, and criminals of all sorts, and there were those who well knew that the rumors were well founded.

Billy Bush, a notorious scoundrel, but a man who had managed to keep out of the clutches of the law, was a lodger at the tavern, and it was said he had an interest in the business.

The ostensible owner of the place was a German, who was known as Louis Khron. He was a large-sized man, quiet in his ways, but his very appearance was suggestive of a robber of the olden time in the Black Forest.

When Billy Wayne muttered, "He leads to the haunted tavern," it was to the house above described that he alluded.

The dog kept on his way, and at length the haunted tavern became visible, and as the detective drew nearer he observed several men sitting upon the balcony.

Billy Wayne called off the dog. He knew well the animal could catch on to the trail once more, at the proper time, and he did not wish the ruffians sitting on the porch to know that it was a scent that had led him to the haunted tavern.

Billy Wayne walked along, followed by his dog, and soon arrived in front of the tavern, where, for a moment, he came to a halt.

Meantime the men had some moments previously observed his approach.

Billy Bush was with the men seated upon the porch.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, as the pretended half-breed hove in sight, "whom have we here?"

"A Mexican, I reckon," came the response.

The men watched the detective until he came to a halt a few feet from the porch-steps, when Bush called out, after a moment:

"Good day, stranger."

The pretended Indian gazed, but did not make an immediate reply.

"Are you looking for some one?"

"No," came the answer.

"What do you want?"

"Nothing."

"Well, take it and go."

The Indian did not move, and Bush and his companions paid no more attention to him.

After some time the Indian walked into the house, laid down his money and said:

"Whisky."

The liquor was handed to him. He drank, and with his dog walked out, and a moment later man and dog lay stretched upon the porch fast asleep.

The men paid no attention to him, the man was not worth attention, and the latter statement only proves how well the detective acted his part.

A couple of hours passed, when a lone man

was seen riding down the road toward the tavern.

"Hello, who comes here? I reckon this is visitor's day," exclaimed one of the men.

Bush glanced at the horseman as the latter drew nearer and said:

"That man comes to see me. You boys just hold as you are, while I have a few moments' talk with him."

"Hello," said one of the men, "it's a gentleman," and a glitter shone in the fellow's eye. He was hungering for a chance to murder and steal, or do anything for a boodle.

The horseman reached the tavern, leaped from his saddle, and permitted his horse to walk off toward the stable.

Bush had risen from his seat, and had walked away to the far end of the porch, in his way being compelled to step over the sleeping Indian whom he was half inclined to kick.

The horseman proved to be Tom Zara.

"Well, Bush, how goes it?" he asked.

"About the same, sir," came the response.

The men at the time were standing around at the side of the house, but not so far away that a pair of sharp ears could not overhear all that passed, provided the parties spoke in an ordinary tone of voice.

"Have you heard anything new?" demanded Zara.

"From what quarter?"

"Wayne."

"No; I've had no business with him."

"Are you ready to have a little deal with him?"

"Under certain circumstances, yes."

"You said he must be invited to the house?"

"Yes."

"He will be there."

"When?"

"To-night."

"At what hour?"

"Some time between the hours of eight and ten o'clock."

"He comes alone?"

"Yes."

"Under what circumstances was the appointment made?"

"You need have no fear, Bush; it's all right," was the response.

CHAPTER XX.

BUSH was a bad man, but he was a cautious man. He was a schemer, but was always loath to take chances of death or arrest. A moment he was thoughtful, but at length he inquired:

"How do you know it is all right?"

"The colonel is beating the fellow at his own game."

"The colonel may think so, but after all may himself be the gudgeon on the hook end of the rod."

"You need have no fear."

"Tell me the circumstances under which the appointment was made with Wayne?"

"It is not necessary. I tell you it is all right, and you can safely make all your arrangements."

"I must know all the facts."

Tom Zara told of the visit of the peddler and how his shrewd and cunning brother had discerned under the guise of the peddler the deep scheming detective.

Bush listened attentively, and at length said:

"I don't like it, sir."

"You don't like what?"

"I tell you, sir, Billy Wayne is a strange man, he fell into the scheme too readily."

"Bah, you are appalled by that man!"

"If we do not take care, you and the colonel will be appalled by him in the end."

"Never mind, he is to be at the mansion to-night some time between the hours of eight and ten o'clock."

"So I understand."

"We have done our part; we have secured his presence, now will you do as you agreed?"

"I will be on hand with my men."

"How many?"

"Six."

"You will have them properly stationed?"

"I will."

"You will be on hand in time?"

"I will attend to all the details. I promise to be on hand and that is enough. I will not fail to be there."

"And you will do your work?"

"I will try to earn the promised reward."

"Have you the men on hand?"

"I have them here."

"You had better bring all the men at your command."

"Leave the matter to me. I will do the best I can."

Tom Zara walked around to the stables, mounted his horse and rode away.

The detective, during the whole of the foregoing conversation, had lain seemingly fast asleep upon the porch.

Bush returned and joined his companion, and in doing so once more stepped over the form of the sleeping Indian.

Half an hour passed. The Indian awoke, entered the bar-room and drank another whisky, and, followed by his dog, walked away.

His coming and going attracted but little attention and yet the keen detective had made a most wonderful discovery. He had settled the matter in his mind that Rose Richland, on the night of the abduction or murder, had been brought to the haunted tavern, and he was preparing in his mind several plans to solve a deep mystery; and the gang who loitered about the tavern were favoring his plans involuntarily.

The detective, when at a safe distance, let the dog loose, and took a course which led him to circle round the tavern. The animal sniffed along lazily but suddenly he uttered a low signal bark, and started upon a trail.

"Hello!" muttered the detective. "What have we here?"

Little did the brave man dream, at the moment, what a terrible and ghastly discovery was to attend the following of the new trail.

Billy was a little set back by the dog's movements. The animal was so well trained our hero did not deem it possible he could be diverted by a new scent, and was led to believe that the animal had accidentally fallen upon a fresh scent of the old trail.

The dog moved along rapidly. The course was over hill and dale, through woods and swamps—far away from roads and all beaten tracks.

Billy Wayne began to become greatly excited; the hound's movements portended the most terrible possibilities.

On, on, the animal sped, and the detective followed, and at length the hound led the way to a black pool far off in the woods—a spot where mortal man would not be apt to go unless through accident, as the whole region was lonely and barren—uninviting to the farmer or the hunter. When near the pool the hound suddenly came to a halt, and planted himself, with his nose between his paws, to await the approach of his master.

The latter well knew what the dog's actions meant. He felt certain the animal had made a find, and so the result proved.

Billy Wayne ran forward and discovered his hound planted over a lady's glove.

"Well, well!" ejaculated the detective, as he raised the hand covering and carefully examined it.

The glove was of a lady's wear. A white one, and though soiled by weather was but little worn; indeed, it had been a comparatively new one when dropped.

A sad look came to the detective's eyes; the little find was the most foreboding incident of the whole case. His mind reverted back to the words of Bush, "You need not concern yourself, the girl is silenced!"

"After all," muttered Wayne, "I fear it has been a murder, and all that is left to me is to find out the guilty party and bring him to justice."

The officer stood for a long time lost in thought; but at length he gave his dog the right signal and the animal resumed the trail.

"I am searching now for the dead," were the words that fell from the detective's lips.

The latter kept close with his dog, the animal reached the shores of the black pool and moved slowly along its miry brink with his nose close to the mud.

"Hold!" called the detective, and the animal came to a stand.

Wayne had noted many footprints, and he set to measure them before they had been crossed or marred by his own tracks. He found no less than four different imprints, showing that, whatever the deed that had been committed, four men had been engaged in the crime.

"This is terrible!" he muttered.

The officer was fully satisfied at that moment as to the nature of the ghastly discovery which awaited him.

All hope of ever finding the missing girl alive had vanished from his mind.

"So young, so beautiful, and yet what a terrible fate!" he muttered.

The dog stood awaiting his command, and at length it was given.

The animal moved slowly, but at length came to a halt. A moment he stood over a certain spot; and then, bending down, he lifted up his snout and uttered a low, dismal howl. It was the death wail. Wayne recognized the ominous moan, and his heart stood still.

It was a terrible moment, and a striking tableau was presented, as the officer, in a sad, sad tone, murmured:

"I have found her at last—not the living, but the dead!"

CHAPTER XXI.

BILLY WAYNE was an iron-nerved man, but at that moment he actually trembled.

The dog had marked the spot. Wayne knew where to dig, and he knew just what he should find—the ghastly evidence of one of the most terrible crimes of modern times.

The detective glanced around for something wherewith to dig. The ground was soft, and he had reason to believe that the victim of the murder had been buried but a short distance below the surface. A few moments passed; the dog had done his work and had walked away and settled. At length our hero paced around, looking for something wherewith to dig. He found a slab stick and set to work.

Wayne's original conclusion proved correct. The object interred had been buried less than eighteen inches below the surface, and, in a few moments, portions of a lady's dress were disclosed.

"Just as I expected," moaned the officer, and he stopped a moment from his task. Night, however, was coming apace, the shadows were already lengthening, and he resumed his labor.

His task was speedily completed, the buried object was brought to the surface; it was a ghastly find, but the result was not what he had anticipated—he did not find a body, but did find a lot of blood-stained female apparel.

"Well, well," he muttered, "this is terrible. I have the evidence satisfactory to myself, but I have not the proofs I need wherewith to confront the assassins."

The detective's theory was based on most singular and remarkable facts. He had started the dog upon a scent taken from a slipper which he knew had been worn by the murdered girl. The animal had trailed directly to the lodgings of a gang of assassins, and from the latter point he had trailed to the spot where the blood-stained garments were found, but there was no body, and before a murder could be established a body must be produced.

The detective argued in his mind that the girl had been carried to the tavern. She had been murdered. The body had been concealed in one place and the bloody clothing in another.

"I must find the body," muttered Wayne. He had given up all hope of ever finding the living girl.

"Come, Bruno," he said, "we will continue the search."

Wayne led the hound away from the grave and started him on one of the tracks. The keen animal scented awhile and then started upon a fresh trail. He sped around the shore of the pool with his nose to the ground and at length uttered the usual signal bark and started away. He had gone but a short distance when our hero noticed that his course lay directly back to the tavern by a different route.

"What does this mean?" he muttered, but he kept on after his dog.

The animal led the way, and it was after dark when the lights of the tavern were disclosed.

"I reckon that now, Bruno, old fellow, I'll have to run this trail alone," was the muttered exclamation of the detective as he bade the dog "lay low."

The animal obeyed and Billy knew that he would settle until again summoned, even though he were left alone during the long hours of the whole night.

The detective started off alone toward the tavern. He moved cautiously and kept out of sight and managed to creep near enough to overhear the voices of the men gathered upon the porch; indeed, he could distinguish almost every word spoken.

Bush was sitting on the piazza surrounded by several men, and, as they thought themselves surrounded by only their own *confrères*, they talked in ordinary tones.

"I'll tell you, boys," said Bush, "I do not

fancy the job we have in hand to-night. I've got a sort of presentiment that there's a rock in the channel we have not discovered."

There came an answer from one of the men in a fierce voice:

"Look here, Bush, don't give us any of your forebodings. Is there any money in the thing?"

"The biggest money we ever went for on a clear night."

"That's enough. Hang the rocks in the channel!"

"All right, boys, I feel bound to do my duty, so there will not be any after-kicking. I want you to know who the man is we are after to-night."

"I don't care if it's the Governor of the State of Missouri or the Mayor of St. Louis."

"It's neither."

"Who is it?"

"A worse man than either of those you have named."

"Well, who is it?"

"A terror."

"Name him."

"Can't you guess?"

"No."

"Wayne."

"Billy Wayne?" came the surprised query.

"Yes."

A moment's silence followed the announcement, but at length the man who had spoken so fiercely said:

"I would have liked it better if it had been the mayor or the governor, but as it's Wayne, we must act all the same."

"Can we do it?"

"Why can't we do it? You say the man is to visit the colonel to-night. He comes alone. He ain't on the lookout."

"There's the rub, we never know when Wayne is on the lookout."

"He's human, Bush."

"He looks like a mortal, but I'll swear he picks up information like a man who is in league with the devil."

"The devil ain't on his side, he's with us, you bet."

"Well, so be it, I've opened up the whole business."

"And you've done just right."

"Shall we take in the job?"

"Of course we'll take in the job."

"Then it's time we were on the move."

"We'll go."

"I'll order up the animals. We'll ride to the corners, picket our horses and travel on foot."

"That's just the racket. I take it, we've got this game in our own hands to-night. We have the money, and get rid of the man whom of all others we've most to fear, as we stand."

Bush put two fingers into his mouth. There followed a shrill whistle, and an instant later a man appeared; the horses were ordered from the stable, and in due time seven steeds stood saddled before the tavern door.

Billy Wayne had been a listener to all that had passed between the seven rascals who had set out on this dangerous work. Our hero would have liked to have given the men a little turn at their own game, but he had other business on hand for the night. He was set to trace the body of the murdered girl, and he made up his mind to take advantage of the absence of the seven men to carry out a purpose he had in view.

The detective was greatly disappointed, and in a bitter mood. His original theory had proved, as it appeared, all wrong, and the purpose of his trail had been changed.

"I'll have a chance yet to settle with you fellows!" was his muttered comment as the seven rascals rode away.

Billy Wayne lay low and watched their departure; and when the sound of their horses' feet died away, he changed his position, approaching nearer to the house.

Billy watched awhile, and at length saw the proprietor of the tavern come out upon the piazza, and seat himself to enjoy a good smoke in the cool of the evening.

A few moments passed, when the detective emerged from his place of concealment and advanced toward the tavern.

As the detective ascended the stoop the tavern-keeper eyed him critically but remained silent.

"Good-evening," said the detective.

"Good-evening. Why are you not mit de poys to-night?"

"I wanted to have a little talk with you, Louis."

"A little talk mit me?"

"Yes."

"Vot vos your pizziness mit me now? I vos come dot I look at you, I see you vos a stranger roundt here."

"Yes, I am a stranger round here, but you and I will become better known to each other when the clouds have rolled away."

CHAPTER XXII.

LOUIS, the tavern keeper, was a desperate man and withal he was a suspicious and vindictive fellow. He said:

"I don't like it dot you vos come here like you vos."

"You don't like it, eh?"

"No, I vos not like it: in de first blace, you vos not vot you look like."

"How do you know?"

"I vos know from de vay you vos talk."

Billy Wayne had not attempted to disguise his speech; he meant business and did not care to throw dust in the tavern keeper's eyes, simply because he had set to go forward in the most positive and direct manner.

"Well, Louis, let's get down to business."

"Vot vos your pizziness mit me?"

"How are you making out here?"

"Dot vos not your pizziness."

"Would you like to make a little money?"

"I vos always ready dot I make a little money."

"And you would like to keep out of trouble?"

"I vos nefer get in troubles, because I vos always mind mine own pizziness."

"You are in trouble now, though, old man."

"Eh, vot vos dot you say?"

"You're in trouble."

"Vot troubles vos I in now?"

"The detectives are on your track."

"De detectives are on my track?"

"Yes."

"Dot vos all right, dey vos many times on my track, but dey nefer makes nuddings out mit me."

"They've got you dead to rights this time."

"Vos dot so?"

"Yes."

"How vos dey got me?"

"On this last affair."

"You vos mean der pizziness dot vos go on ter-night?"

"No."

"Vot vos you mean?"

"I mean the business that happened the other night."

"Vell, vot vos happens de udder nights?"

"A lady was brought here."

"Vos dot so?"

"Yes."

"Vell, did she vos go away again?"

"She was murdered."

"Vos dot so?"

"We've got all the points on you."

"Vos dot so?"

"Yes."

"Who vos it? You might be mine friendt. You vos such a smart feller I should like dot I vos make your acquaintance."

"You are making my acquaintance pretty fast."

"Vos dot so?"

Every time the tavern-keeper repeated the phrase, "Vos dot so?" he exchanged the tone of his voice, making each exclamation the more expressive.

"Now, then, Louis, you are a lucky man."

"Vos dot so?"

"You can get out of this scrape."

"Vos dot so?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Give the whole thing away."

"Vot vos I gif away?"

"Where is the girl?"

"Vich girl?"

"Rose Richland."

"Mebbe she vos in New York. I vos not know."

"You can make some money, I tell you."

"Vos dot so?"

"Are you ready to treat with me?"

"Mebbe I vos. How much money vos I make?"

"A couple of thousand."

"Dollars?"

"Yes."

"And vot must I do dat I make so much money?"

"Tell me where I will find the body of the murdered girl?"

"Vos dere a girl murdered?"

"No trifling, Louis."

The detective was only leading a "fly" conversation. He did not expect to make anything directly out of the tavern-keeper; but he was working one of his methods, and he always had a point in view when he started in on a dialogue as above quoted.

"I vos not trifle mit you, but you vos trifle mit me."

"How so?"

"You vos told me dot dere vos a murder done in mine house, und now I vos told you dot you vos lie!"

"Do you mean to compel me to arrest you?"

"Ah! I vos vun of dose detectives, eh?—vun of dose smart tellers dot vos always fooling aroundt mine house, making me troubles."

"I am here to get certain information, and I will get it!"

"Eh, dot vos so? Vell, you vos welcome dot you got all de information vot you likes, but vos got nuddings from me!"

"You refuse to aid me?"

"I vos refuse dot I haf anything to do mit you, und it vos better dot you vos go off und attend mit your own pizziness, or I vos show you somedings!"

"What will you show me?"

"Somedings you vos not pleased mit, I-vos sure!"

"Well, let the show open."

"Dere vos time enough."

"You have not much time."

"I vos not haf much times, eh?"

"No."

"Vy not?"

"I will arrest you."

"You vos arrest me, eh?"

"Yes."

"Vos dot so?"

"I mean what I say; and meantime, old man, open up or I shall."

"Vos dot so?"

"Will you turn in with me and make some money, or compel me to arrest you?"

"You vos a smart feller; you comes here vech no vun vos at homes, eh?"

"Yes."

"Dot vos vot you tink?"

"Yes."

"Vell, I vos show you somedings you vos not tink."

"Go on with your show."

"I vos in no hurry. Mebbe you vos make up your mindt dot you go away."

"When I go away you go with me, unless we come to an understanding."

"Vos dot so?"

The detective smiled pleasantly, and answered, imitatively:

"Yes, dot vos so."

"Vell, mebbe it vos better dot you go ahead."

The detective advanced one step toward the tavern-keeper, when the latter exclaimed:

"Hold on! you vos come near enough. I vos not like your company so vell."

"Once more, will you turn in with me?"

"No, I vos not turn in mit you."

"Then you will take the consequences."

"Vos dot so? Vell, now, you shust vatch."

As the tavern-keeper spoke, he uttered a low whistle, and there came a startling response to his signal.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THREE men, desperate-looking fellows, sprung forward from within the tavern. The German host uttered a low, satirical laugh, and said:

"Dot vos mine show."

Billy Wayne showed no surprise.

"Look here, poys," said the tavern-keeper, "you vos come shust in time. Here vos an Alec Smart who vos make up his mindt dot he would kidnap me; eh, vot you vos tink?"

The tavern-keeper had evidently expected to see the detective wilt, but Wayne stood there as unconcerned as though he had been expecting the sudden appearance of the three men.

One of them expressed himself. He said:

"I reckon, stranger, you must have made a mistake."

"Vos dot so?" responded the detective, giving a most excellent imitation of the German's manner of using the exclamation.

"I don't think you have any business that will detain you around here any longer."

"Vos dot so?" exclaimed Wayne.

"What are you giving me, stranger?"

"Who are you, anyhow?"

"Are you anxious to find out who I am?"

"Not anxious; but I'm ready to accept any information."

"How will you have it?"

As the man spoke he exposed an ugly-looking bowie-knife.

"Sometimes I take it that way," was the ready response.

The desperado was taken a little aback. He had expected to see the stranger "take water" and was not prepared for such a defiant answer.

"Do you talk fight?" asked the desperado.

"No, I don't talk it," was the quick answer.

"You're looking for it."

"No, but I don't get away from it when it's forced on me."

"There's three of us, stranger"

"I'm not blind."

"Will you git!"

"Not at once."

The man suddenly sprung forward, weapon in hand, and his companions joined in the onslaught.

Billy Wayne was a born fighter, and he was a man who had enjoyed a large experience; as the men sprung at him, Billy leaped back and quickly produced a club, and a thrilling scene followed.

We have oftentimes explained the terrible execution that can be done with a club in the hands of an athletic and powerful man at close quarters. It is indeed a formidable weapon, and, in the hands of a man who knows how to use it in certain contingencies, it is more effective than knife or pistol. Billy Wayne was an expert with the club, and in less than fifty seconds his three opponents knew it. The wretches had come at him suddenly and were not prepared for the club, and their lack of forewarning proved fatal to them; they were doomed before they really realized what had hit them.

When the detective made up his mind to win, he generally did so. The present was no exception. The three men soon found themselves at his mercy. They suddenly lost all inclination to resist, and the victory was a signal one for the detective.

The tavern-keeper had risen to his feet and stood by an amazed witness, and the fellow trembled from head to feet as the detective demanded:

"Well, Louis, how have I performed my part in the show?"

"You vos de bery devil," answered the tavern-keeper.

Billy deliberately set to work to bind his victims' hands and feet. He had stunned them, and he proceeded to secure them, and his work was quickly done. The three desperadoes lay helpless before him.

The tavern-keeper stood by and offered no interference, and when Billy had concluded his work he said:

"Well, Louis, is there another act, or is the show over?"

"I guess dot de show vos ofer."

"You tink so?"

"Yes."

"Not yet, old man, you and I must appear in a double act for an after-piece."

"Eh, vot you vos vant mit me?"

"I think we rehearsed our parts. I told you what your business was in the next scene."

"See here, stranger: who vos you, anyhow?"

"I'm a traveling smart Alec, I am, and now, Louis, get out your 'barkers,' the curtain has been 'rung up' for us."

"I vos not fight mit you."

"Are you going to let me carve you up without making a show against me?"

"I vos not going to haf anytings to do mit you."

"Oh, yes, you will! You opened it—this business—and you are going to stay now."

"Vill you come along mit me?"

"Where?"

"Ve vos go inside."

"What for?"

"Ve vos take a drink."

"Vos dot so?"

"Yes; I vos treat dis time."

"You are very kind, old man; but I can't here on other business."

"I vos talk udder pizziness mit you."

The tavern-keeper passed our hero a signal, and Wayne said:

"All right; I will go in and take a drink with you."

The two men entered the bar, when the tavern-keeper said:

"I vos gif eferytting away."

"All right: dot so."

"Yes, I vos do so; but you must pass your word dot all vill be right mit me, Mister Wayne."

"Eh?" ejaculated our hero.

"Yes, I vos understand now; I knows who you vos. But it vos all right, only you must promise dot I vos oudt clear mit dis pizziness."

"What did you have to do with this business?"

"Noddings."

"You had nothing to do with it?"

"Noddings at all, Mister Wayne."

"Understand me, Louis; if you can satisfy me that you had nothing to do with it you are safe."

"All I did vos keep mine mouth shut, und I vos try not tole you anydings; dot vos all; but de gal; she vas deadt ven she vos brought here mit de gang; dat vos de trufe."

Billy Wayne gave a start. The words, "de girl vas deadt ven she vos brought here," told a terrible tale.

"Louis, my word is good. I tell you now that if you are innocent you are all right."

"I vas innocent only dot I keeps mine mouth shut."

"Tell me all about it."

"Dot vos all I knows; de udder night a deadt gal vos brought here."

"By whom?"

"Vell, it vos not right dot you make me tole so much. She vos brought here by de gang."

"Was Bush with the gang?"

"Yes."

"Where is the body now?"

"Dot I vos not able dot I tole you."

"Was the body taken away from here?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"De same night."

"Did you see the body?"

"No."

"How do you know it was the body of a young lady?"

"I vos heard de men talk."

The detective had struck a wonderful clew.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE detective questioned the tavern-keeper closely until fully convinced that the man was telling the truth. He said:

"Now then, Louis, I have but just one more word to say to you, that, if you are deceiving me I shall learn the true facts in the end, and then woe betide you!"

"I vos not deceive you."

"And you swear you do not know what was done with the body?"

"Yes; I swear."

"And you did not see the body?"

"I did not see it—dot vos de trufe."

The detective appeared to be satisfied, and he said:

"I reckon I will wait around here until your friend comes back."

"Which friendt it vos of mine?"

"Bush."

The German looked perplexed, and, for a moment, was lost in thought; but at length he said:

"Vos you know vare mein friendt vos gone?"

"No."

"How vos it dot you know he vos come back?"

"This is his head-quarters?"

"Vell, sometimes he vos come here."

"And you expect him to-night?"

"You vos stay here and wait for him?"

"Yes."

"Vell, den I vos dell you de trufe—I tinks ae vill come back."

"You expect him?"

"Yes."

"All right, I will wait; but you must not tell aim I am around."

"I vos not tole him dot for sure, but der udder fellers dey vos tole him."

"They do not know who I am."

"Vos dot so? Vell, it vos petter dot you vos make up your mindt dot dey vos know vell enough."

"Never mind; he need not know that I am here when he comes."

"Dot vos all right; you vos make sure dot I vos not tole him."

The detective started to go away, when the tavern-keeper said:

"Holdt on; dot vos not right."

"What is the matter now?"

"You must serve me like you vos serve de udder fellers."

"You want me to lay you out, eh?"

"No."

"What then?"

"You must tie me up. We makes a fight; you vos get de best of me, and den you fix me like de udder fellers."

"Why will you have it so?"

"Oof you vos not make it, den dose fellers would say I vos laying in mit you."

"Ah, I see."

The detective sprung toward the tavern-keeper; the two men struggled and made considerable noise, and at the length the German was borne to the floor, in a few moments was bound and tied in a similar manner as the other men. The little game suited our hero, as he had set to "run in on a racket" different from what he had given out.

Having fixed the tavern-keeper the detective stole from the house, and when a good distance away, after having secured his dog, he looked at his watch to learn what time he had to reach Col. Zara's house.

"I might do it," he muttered, and he moved forward with the pace and gait of a veritable Indian.

It did not take the detective any length of time to decide upon his course of action, and when approaching the colonel's house, he came to a halt.

"Now, then, Bruno, old man," he said, "we will see what you can do."

The dog was put upon the scent and soon struck a trail and away he sped. The animal did not go far before he came to a stand. Wayne studied the motions of the hound, and, reaching a conclusion, acted accordingly.

The animal was bidden to "lay low," and the detective ran forward and speedily came upon the place where the assassins had picketed their horses. It became an open trail. Billy called his dog forward, put him to the scent, and the pursuit was resumed.

The detective followed close upon the heels of his dog, and soon the animal gave a sign which his master well understood. Again the dog was bidden to "lay low," and Billy Wayne crawled cautiously forward.

Our hero at the time was within the inclosure surrounding the grounds attached to Col. Zara's house.

The tread of the detective was as noiseless as that of a real Indian, and he was keenly upon the alert for an enemy. After running along in a stealthy manner he dropped to his hands and knees and crawled forward, and again, upon advancing a little further, he came upon his game.

It was a clear starlight night, and Billy Wayne saw a man crouched in the long grass; the fellow held a cocked carbine in his hand, and his attitude and the place where he lay indicated an evil purpose.

As the cat with light and measured tread steals toward its prey so Billy crawled toward the crouching assassin. The detective had drawn his club and was within a few feet of the man when the latter moved. Wayne lay still. The man changed his position and still Billy held to his halt. The man turned slowly around, and his glance fell upon the crouching detective.

"Who's there?" he asked in a low tone.

The detective made the characteristic answer:

"It's me."

"I reckon our man is not coming to-night."

The detective discerned that the assassin had fallen to the natural conclusion that he was speaking to one of his pals.

"How long have you lain here?"

"Over an hour."

"And haven't you heard anything?"

"Not a sound."

"Nor I."

"What were your orders?" demanded the man.

"My orders were to lay low and watch."

"Have you been lying near here?"

"No, I've been over by the main gate."

"And you have seen or heard nothing?"

"Nothing."

"I reckon it's a failure."

"That's my idea, and I came mousing around to learn if I had missed any points."

"I reckon you have not missed any points this night."

"Have you a flask?"

"Yes."

"I'm dry; pass it over."

"Come and get it."

The detective was as cool as mortal man e'er could be, while thus talking with a determined

rascal who had been posted to commit a murder at sight; and when the man said, "Come and get it," the detective crawled forward, and, when quite near enough, the unsuspecting assassin reached forward the flask.

Billy Wayne was not only a cool, nervy man, but possessed of extraordinary physical strength; and, instead of taking the flask, he seized the man by the wrist, and quick as lightning gave him a jerk. The fellow was drawn over upon his face, his weapon fell from his hand, and Billy was upon him. He would have uttered a cry, but the detective had seized him by the throat, and iron fingers stifled the signal which had struggled to the villain's lips.

It was a noiseless but a desperate struggle. The advantage was with the detective, and the enemy was subdued, and in less time than it takes to tell it he was choked to helplessness, and then the darbies were clapped upon his wrists. The victory was with Wayne.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE assassin was at the detective's mercy. The latter drew a bowie-knife, after having first secured his victim's cocked weapon, and in a low tone, he said:

"Make the least outcry, and you are a dead man!"

The fellow had received a terrible choking, and for a moment he was unable to speak, even had he been so inclined.

Wayne laid the cold steel upon his cheek, and repeated the words, "make the least noise, and you are a dead man!"

The man at length gained enough voice to ask:

"Who are you?"

"Never mind who I am. It is enough for you to know that I mean business, and now tell me what were you doing here with that cocked and loaded gun?"

"I was looking for 'possums."

"My friend, have you any requests to make before you die?"

The detective spoke in a decided and matter-of-fact tone. The man appeared to discern that danger threatened, and he answered:

"You are not going to 'kroke' me in cold blood, are you, stranger?"

"You have a chance to save your life."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Open up."

"Who are you?"

"It matters not to you who I am; but I will take your deposition all the same."

"Are you a friend of Wayne?"

"Yes, I am a friend of Wayne."

"Is the detective around here?"

"He is not far off."

"Are you Wayne?"

"You may call me his agent."

"Will you see Wayne to-night?"

"I may."

"Soon?"

"Yes."

"Tell him to keep away from the Zara house to-night."

"Why?"

"There's danger for him."

"Who is seeking to harm him?"

"You must not ask me more; I've given you the lead. Go to Wayne, and he will know what to do."

The man whom the detective had caught and overcome was a cunning fellow. There had been no need for him to ask who his captor was. He knew the very instant the struggle commenced that he was wrestling with the indomitable Wayne. Taking advantage of his discovery the villain attempted to play smart by seeming to show a readiness to give everything dead away.

"So you think you have given all the information the law allows?"

"Yes; and if you are a friend of Wayne you can save his life."

"I can?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Go tell him what I have told you."

"Eh? what was it you told me?"

"I told you to tell Wayne his life was threatened; to tell him not to enter Colonel Zara's grounds to-night."

"And you call that information?"

"Yes, I do."

"Johnny, you must do better. Wayne would laugh at me were I to carry that tale to him. He would ask me for all the particulars."

"He will be warned, and that is enough."
 "You think so?"
 "I do."
 "Yours is a poor 'kid,' Johnny. Now listen. I've got you dead, you must gain my favor."
 "Who are you?"
 "Bah, don't play that on me, please; you know well enough who I am."
 "Are you Billy Wayne?"
 "You may imagine I am Billy Wayne, and open up just the same as though you were speaking to Wayne himself."
 "On my honor I've nothing to tell. I was posted only as a sentinel to give warning."
 "Your gun was loaded Johnny, and you might as well know first as last that you can not fool me, and now open up."
 "What are you after?"
 "The whole business."

"Then you have collared the wrong man, as I know nothing about the game going on."
 "Were you with the party that buried the girl?"
 "No."
 "Do you know anything about that affair?"
 "No."

"Who is the best man to seek for information?"

"Bush."
 "Where is he?"
 "In the house with the colonel."
 "He is there now?"
 "Yes."

The detective thought there was a possibility that the man told the truth, and, besides, he concluded that he was really wasting time with the fellow.

When Wayne started the trail with his hound he had a definite idea as to his purpose; and, when he discovered the horses of the assassins, he secured several little articles which he thought might aid him in his game; and, among other things, he had secured a coil of woven grass rope, such as is used by the cowboys, and other riders upon the plains, to make lariats.

"I don't think you're any good to me, old man," said the detective, as he arose from the fellow's body.

"I'm giving you all the information I possess."

The detective had secured his man temporarily, and he bade him rise to his feet. Wayne led him to a tree to which he bound him in such a manner that the fellow would have stood there and starved to death before he could ever have released himself; and he was also gagged, so that he could utter no cry for help.

"Now, my friend," said the detective, "if you are patient you are all right, and, in good time, you will be released; but, if you are impatient, the chances are against you."

Having secured the rascal to his satisfaction the detective started his dog on a fresh trail, and we will state that, ten minutes later a second man was captured in the same manner as the first one had been.

Wayne did not stop to ask the second man any questions, but, with his grass rope, proceeded at once to bind the fellow to a tree in the same manner as he had bound the first chap; and, as soon as assassin number two was secured the detective started for number three, and, with his usual coolness and nerve, he gobbled the latter, and secured him as he had secured the other two. Thus the cool, determined man proceeded until he had five of the ruffians treed, and he started for the sixth man.

The assassins had been well posted for the murderous game they had in hand, and our hero had but little difficulty in finding the sixth man, whom he overcame and secured.

The assassins were thus all cared for save their leader, and the latter was with Col. Zara, or at least concealed somewhere within the mansion.

Our hero recognized the last man as one of the most desperate scoundrels in the south-west; a man for whom he had a warrant, and when his man was secured, the detective said:

"Well, Silviri, you and I have met at last."
 The man uttered a curse. It was not until the detective used the words above quoted that the fellow realized the real identity of the man who had caught him as the hunter traps the hare.

"It's no use cursing, Silviri; you're a lucky man, and so am I."

"I can't see it," said the man.
 "You will squeal to save your life?"
 "I will," came the answer.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BILLY WAYNE knew his man well. He knew that Silviri was a scoundrel who would at any time give all his companions away, if necessary, to save his own life.

"I've got you dead to rights now, Silviri."
 "I'm owning it up," came the reply.
 "I can hang you."
 "As it stands, you've the hand."

"But you can save your life."
 "How?"
 "Give the game away."

"Have I your word that I shall 'fit' if I open up?"
 "You have my word."

"I can't hang, and Billy Wayne, as you've got me, I'm your man."

The detective had been trailing for just such a man as Silviri, and he said:
 "Silviri, I've got all the 'points' down to a certain time, and now I want you to tell me what was done with the body of the murdered girl."

"You're off, Wayne," came the answer.

"Off?"
 "Yes."
 "How?"
 "The gal wasn't murdered."

"Is that the way you've started in to 'open up,' old man?"

"Well, look here, if she was murdered I know nothing about it. When I saw her first she was dead. I won't say she weren't murdered, but, if she was, poison did it, for the body was not mutilated."

The man spoke in a cold-blooded, matter-of-fact manner.

"When did you see the body first?"
 "When it was taken out of the carriage at the tavern."

A new light broke in upon the detective's mind, and on its wane it bore a glimmer of hope.

"The body was brought to the tavern?"

"Yes."
 "By whom?"
 "Bush."

"Was he alone?"
 "No."
 "Who was with him?"
 "Markham."

Thus far the man's story appeared to be straight.

"Why was the body brought to the tavern?"
 "To dress it up, I reckon."

The glimmer of hope became a brighter flame in the detective's heart.

"How was it dressed?"
 "In gay clothes. We called it the dead bride."

"Why?"
 "Because the wedding clothes were not put on until after death, the body was dressed plain enough when first taken from the carriage."

The detective's hope was becoming a reality, his suspicion a certainty.

"Silviri, are you telling me the truth?"
 "I am; look here, Wayne, I had no interest in the game, whatever it was. I am telling the truth, as there was no money in it for me."

"What was done with the body?"
 "I don't know."

"Now, you are going back on me."
 "I swear I am not; I was not in the racket, I tell you."

"And you do not know what was done with the body?"

"I do not; but I have a suspicion."
 "Ah! you have a suspicion?"

"Yes."
 "What is your suspicion?"

The detective's heart, as he asked the question, was in his throat.

"It's my idea the body was tossed into the lake."

The detective's brave heart gave a great bound; the words of Silviri were a whole volume of revelation, and opened up a world of hope.

"Don't you know that the body was tossed into the lake?"

"No."
 "What makes you suspect it was so disposed of, old man?"

"Certain little incidents that occurred afterward."

"What were the incidents?"
 "The lake was dragged the next morning."

"Yes, but the body was not found."
 "But they were looking for it."

"If the body was really tossed into the lake what could have become of it?"

"That is something I can't tell. I was not in the game; but it may have been a part of the game somehow."

"Silviri, if you are telling me the truth, you are doing a big thing for yourself."

"I am telling the truth. I've nothing to gain by lying—all to gain by telling the truth."

"One more question. What became of the living girl?"

"Which girl?"
 "The one that was abducted."

"I know nothing of the living girl."
 "You saw the body that was tossed into the lake?"

"Yes."
 "And it was the body of whom?"

"Well, there comes in a mystery. I thought it was the body of Colonel Zara's ward; but, from words I overheard, I was led to believe that it was not."

"From words that you overheard?"
 "Yes."

"Words between whom?"
 "Bush and Markham."

"What words did you hear?"
 "I heard Markham say, 'When the body is found all will be ready to swear that it is the body of Rose Zara.'"

The detective was thoughtful a moment. He was working up to a most strange and extraordinary denouement.

"Who were the 'all'?"
 "Well, I suppose they meant the people who found the body."

"Silviri, you are a smart man."
 "Thank you."

"You were not in this game?"
 "No."

"But you saw a little of its workings?"
 "Yes."

"You had a chance to form an opinion as to its purpose?"

"Well, a little."
 "Now, old man, just listen to me a moment. There was to have been a marriage that night."

"Yes, sir; and that's just where the game started in, according to my idea."

"The living bride disappeared," continued the detective.

"So I've heard."
 "A dead girl was brought to the tavern."

"I saw the body."
 "The body was dressed in wedding apparel."

"To that I'll swear."
 "The dead body was tossed into the lake."

"So I believe."
 "Now, then, old man, what is your idea?"

"What is it you are trying to get at, Wayne?"
 "I wish to learn just what conclusion you would reach, with a knowledge of all the facts."

"I would conclude that a conspiracy was in progress."

"But why was the body tossed into the lake, clad in bridal clothes, the same night that the living bride mysteriously disappeared?"

"It was a part of the game."
 "But what was intended to be shown?"

The man Silviri was silent when the detective said:

"Come, old man, I am waiting for your answer. I know you have a suspicion."

"Well, I have."
 "What is your suspicion. Come, will you open it up to me?"

"I will."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE detective began to discern that there was a chance that after all he might start in on a trail for the living.

"Silviri" he said, "I want you to give me a straight opinion, just as though you were figuring this thing out for your own benefit. Now, what's your idea?"

"It's my idea that the dead girl only bore a resemblance to the living bride, that there was some point in making it appear that the intended bride had committed suicide, and I believe Colonel Zara expected to find the body in the lake."

"And when he found it?"
 "He would give out that his ward was dead."

"And the strange resemblance of the corpse would confirm his statement."

"Yes."
 "Now, then, we will assume that the body was cast into the lake."

"Mebbe it wasn't," said the man.
 "But you told me you suspected that such a disposition was made of it."

"I'll tell you, Wayne, I believe that Colonel Zara meant to have the body thrown into the lake."

"You think he expected to see it found there?"

"Yes."

"Then why do you say that possibly it was never cast into the lake?"

"Simply because it was not found there."

"And yet you admit that the colonel expected to find it?"

"Yes."

"What explanation do you offer?"

"I think the colonel was fooled."

"By whom?"

"Bush."

"Why should he fool him?"

"Bush is a deep fellow. He may have had a little under game of his own."

"And pretended to throw the body in the lake when he really made another disposition of it?"

"Yes."

"Th't's your idea?"

"Yes."

"But suppose the body really was cast into the lake?"

"Then it's my idea Bush fished it out again, for the fact remains that six hours later, when the lake was dragged, the body was not found."

"What would be the game of Bush?"

"Ah, now you've got me. I can not tell."

"The body was cast into the lake," said the detective.

"You know it was?"

"Yes."

"Do you know who took it out?"

"I've an idea."

"Does your suspicion rest on Bush?"

"No; Bush is as much mystified as any one."

"Ah, I see, Mr. Wayne, you're a daisy, and no mistake."

"Now, then, Silviri, how about the living bride?"

"I'm lost on that."

"You have no suspicion?"

"Well, I've an idea."

"What is your idea?"

"That she is concealed somewhere."

"You are certain it was not the corpse of Rose Zara you saw at the tavern."

"I am not certain. From the appearance of the dead face, I should have been ready to swear that it was the body of the heiress; but, from what I overheard, and from other little incidents, I am led to suspect it was not."

"Have you the least idea as to the real identity of the dead girl?"

"I have not; but one thing is certain—if it was not the body of Rose Zara, it was the body of her twin sister."

"Did you ever have an idea that the heiress had a sister?"

Silviri once more became silent and thoughtful.

"Come, old man, you are making a friend of me, although I know that, when I came upon you a moment ago, you were lying in wait to shoot me down like a dog."

"Wayne, you were on my track. As I looked at it, the game between us was you or me."

"That's all right; but now listen—you can take my word?"

"I've feared Billy Wayne as I feared no mortal man before; and, Billy Wayne, an hour ago it would have been a pleasant sight for me to gaze on your dead face; but I'll take your word, as I'd take the next best man's oath."

"You can take my word, and I pass my word to you that the past between you and me is all wiped out and evened up on one condition."

"What is the condition?"

"You are to let me in to all you know of the matter we have been talking over."

"I am willing to do it."

"You are holding something back."

"Nothing."

"Then tell me, have you ever heard that Rose Zara had a sister?"

"Never."

"And you now suspect that she had a sister?"

"Yes, I do."

"What leads you to so suspect?"

"Something that happened over two years ago."

"Tell me about it."

"Did you ever know the Italian girl who used to be a maid in Colonel Zara's house?"

"I never knew of any such girl, but it was

not until a few weeks ago that I had any interest in the Zara family."

"There was a girl there, an Italian, and a smart girl she was, and I kept company with her and I would have married her, but she found out that my character was not as good as she had once believed, and she gave me the dead shake by quietly giving up her situation and stealing away to parts unknown."

"What has your love affair to do with the fact of Rose Zara's having had a sister?"

"The Italian girl and I used to meet often and take long walks, and she became quite confidential, and once she made a remark to me which has been recalled to my memory by what has happened within the last few days."

"What was the remark?"

"I must repeat a good part of the whole conversation."

"Do so."

"One bright moonlight night, she and I were walking by the Mere; she appeared sad. I reckon it was just about the time that she first began to hear rumors concerning my character, and I remember she said:

"Leon, this world is full of iniquity and deceit and mystery."

"Yes, Zilla," I answered; "but what started you on that subject, just at this moment?" when she answered by saying:

"Leon, there is a terrible mystery hidden within the walls of the mansion."

"A mystery!" I repeated, and she said:

"Every one supposes Rose, the beautiful child of the house, is the sole heiress to all this vast wealth," and I answered:

"Yes."

"You see," continued Silviri, "I did not care much about the Zara mysteries just at that moment. I was dead in love with the girl, and did not wish to talk about anything but our own love. She had, however, made some sort of a discovery of a startling nature, as she kept on referring to the Zara family, and at length she said:

"Leon, mark my words, there will be a thrilling denouement some day, and it will come out that there is some one who will divide with Rose all the wealth."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE narrative of the man Silviri was indeed a wonderful revelation to a man possessed of the keen perception that distinguished our hero.

"What more did she say?"

"No more."

"Did she give you no grounds for the strange remark?"

"She would have done so, probably, if I had permitted; but, as I told you, at that time I cared nothing about the Zara family and their mysteries."

"And she said no more on that subject?"

"Not a word; and what she did say passed from my mind, and I probably never would have recalled her words, if it had not been, as I said, for the incidents that have occurred within the last few days."

"You have never seen the Italian girl since?"

"Never."

"And have you ever heard or seen anything to confirm her mysterious remarks?"

"Never."

"Now, then, Silviri, how about the living sister?"

"I know nothing of her. I am not in the game."

"But you were in the game to lay me out?"

"That was a side conspiracy."

"You know that the colonel is using Bush?"

"Yes."

"Bush had something to do with the abduction of the living, as well as the disposal of the dead?"

"I should say so."

"And he must know where the living girl is concealed?"

"I reckon he knows more about her than any one else, between you and me. He will make the colonel come down handsome. Bush is a leech; when he once gets his suckers in a man's flesh, it takes a good deal of gold to gorge him to drop off."

"Now, then, old man, one word more; can I trust you?"

"Trust me? yes."

"Where is Bush now?"

"It's my idea he is with the colonel."

"If I leave you I can rely that you will pass no signals?"

"You can."

"Remember, old man, if you go against me now it will be indeed you and I, and you can thus measure your own chances."

"It's a big thing for me to have a friend. I am on your side in the game clean through. I've nothing to make."

"If you stand up to me, you shall make a big stake."

"I'm glad to go into your service."

"Then lay low here until you get word from me, and never let any one know that you and I met, no matter what may happen later on."

"You can depend upon me."

"All right, remember."

The detective, as he spoke the last warning words glided swiftly and noiselessly away.

Billy Wayne began to see his way clear; the night's adventures thus far having been fruitful of wonderful results. He had a clear road before him, and in his way he was set to paralyze both the colonel and Bush.

When beyond sight from the man Silviri, the detective worked one of his pretty transforms, and advanced directly toward the mansion. It was long after the hour when he had agreed to meet the colonel, but as he was supposed to be a poor peddler his dilatoriness was excusable.

Meantime, Bush and the colonel sat in the latter's library. The two men had been talking in a low tone as they waited the appearance of the doomed man.

It had been arranged that Bush was to drop to a "cover" in the room when the detective arrived, and it had furthermore been arranged that Billy Wayne was to be shot down upon leaving the house, not when advancing to the interview.

As the hour drew near when the detective was expected, Bush said in a low tone:

"It's going to be a good game, but I must say I fear our man will not come."

"He is sure to come, and if all your arrangements are complete it is a settled game."

"My arrangements are all complete."

"You are a game man, Bush?"

"Yes, I claim to be."

"It may be that a fracas will open here."

"Better not."

"I propose to denounce him."

"A dangerous game."

"I must take some chances, and I have a purpose."

"All right, colonel, you know your own business, but do not forget we have the most dangerous man in the South west to deal with, and again remember he has some dead 'points' on us."

"What 'points' has he on us?"

"There is one little incident haunts me."

"The body in the lake?"

"No, just the reverse: the disappearance of the body from the lake."

"Are you sure the body ever went into the lake?"

"Am I sure that I am looking at you at this moment?"

"And it's your idea that Wayne was the man who fished the body out?"

"It is."

The hands of the clock were on the hour when the detective was to appear, and both men showed considerable nervousness.

"Suppose he should not come?" said Bush in a husky whisper.

"We can't help it."

"But it will be a bad sign."

"How so?"

"It will prove that he has this point on us, and, between you and me, I fear he has."

"Nonsense."

"You do not know the man."

The clock struck, and both men listened for a signal, but none came.

"He is not on time, sir," whispered Bush.

"Oh, that amounts to nothing. He may be an hour late."

"And will you wait?"

"Certainly."

The two men sat and talked in low tones. Both were pale, and both were nervous and excited, and the time passed slowly on, but their victim came not.

Bush appeared to be more nervous than his companion, and at length he said:

"It is as I feared."

"What did you fear?"

"Billy Wayne is a weasel whom you can never catch asleep. He is putting up a game on us."

"Nonsense!"

"I do not receive any signal from my men—and there, look."

Bush pointed toward the clock.

"It's after the time when he was to come by an hour and a quarter."

"I still expect him."

"I will go out and look after my men."

"No; remain here."

"But my men will expect me."

Bush was anxious to get away. He felt like a man awaiting sentence. He feared Wayne was arranging for one of his grand surprises.

"I must go," he said.

"No; remain. Listen, there is a step upon the gravel walk."

Bush started and exclaimed:

"Is there but one step?"

"There is but one step."

"Lucky for us, if it is so."

"Bah! man, you are losing all your nerve."

"I fear Wayne, the man is a terror."

"To cover!" cried the colonel; "our victim comes!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THERE came a ring at the outer door. The servant had received his instructions, and the detective was admitted and shown immediately into the library.

Colonel Zara had succeeded in hiding all signs of nervousness, and at once demanded:

"Where is the dog?"

"You saw the dog this morning."

"Why did you not bring him?"

"Well, sir, to tell you the truth, I've decided not to sell him."

The detective was gotten up as the tin-peddler.

"If you have decided not to sell him, why did you come here?"

"To tell you, sir," replied the detective, in a humble and respectful manner.

"My man, I don't wish to buy your dog; and had you brought him, I should have told you so."

"Why did you bid me?"

"I wished to ask you a few questions."

"Very well; I am here to answer any questions you may ask."

"You came to my house this morning as a tin-peddler."

"Yes, sir."

"You are not a tin-peddler."

"I have no tin to sell to-night."

"You were in disguise."

"Was I, sir?"

"You were. And now I wish to know who you are, and why you came to my house under false pretenses. Who sent you here, and what were you to learn?"

The detective was not at all taken aback, but answered:

"I came here to look for Miss Rose Richland."

"You came here to look for Miss Rose Richland?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who sent you here?"

"No one."

"Who are you?"

The detective laughed, and answered:

"You know well enough who I am."

"It's false. I believe you are a burglar or some evil fellow who is around here, with no honest purpose."

"You know better, sir."

"How dare you answer me in that manner?"

"You know well enough how I dare answer you in such a manner."

"Be careful, my good fellow, what you say, and please be a little more respectful in your demeanor."

"I've no intention of being disrespectful, but I am bound to tell the truth. You know well enough who I am."

"It's false!"

"If you will come with me, I will prove that you know who I am."

"If I will come with you?"

"Yes."

"Where would you take me?"

"To the several trees where I have your assassins secured."

The colonel let a curse fall from his lips as the detective drew a pair of revolvers, and demanded, in a cool tone:

"Where is Bush?"

"I will not stand this!" exclaimed the colonel.

"Oh, yes, you will stand it, Colonel Zara; and let's you and I come right down to business. You must know by this time that I have

the bulge on you; your scheme is a failure, and I demand at your hands the living Rose Richland."

The colonel turned pale—indeed, for a moment, he actually trembled.

"I begin to suspect your identity."

"Colonel, you know well enough who I am, and you might as well come right down and talk business."

"You are that fellow Wayne?"

"My name is Wayne; and now, as we understand each other, suppose you call on Bush to come forth?"

"I know nothing about the man Bush."

"That won't do, colonel. Bush is here in this room."

"It's false!"

The detective turned toward some heavy hangings in the room, which fell to the floor, and extended several feet in length.

"You say Bush is not in this room?"

"He is not here."

The colonel spoke in a tremulous voice.

"Colonel," said the detective, "I'm going to blaze away through those hangings. If I do not drag out a corpse when I'm through, I will lay down a thousand dollars to pay for damages."

"Sir, you will not dare to discharge your weapons in my house."

"Oh, yes, I will. I am bound to get a living man or a corpse from behind those curtains. You know me now, colonel. I am a man of my word."

The detective raised one of his weapons.

"Hold!" cried the colonel.

"One!" called the detective.

"Hold!" again exclaimed the colonel.

"Two!" called the detective.

He did not have need to call three. Bush, pale and trembling, stepped out into the room.

"Ah, I've got the living man, colonel, and, as I live I will have the living girl also before I leave this house."

Colonel Zara was driven to bay. He was at the worst a brave man as far as physical courage was concerned, and when driven to desperation, he became a recklessly brave man.

"Your name is Wayne?"

"Yes, my name is Wayne."

"Mr. Wayne, I've a few words to say to you."

"Proceed, sir."

"You have been making yourself very conspicuous about my house, casting out innuendoes and flinging insults, and now I wish you to understand that I do not propose to submit any longer to your insults."

The colonel spoke in a calm, determined manner.

"There is but one way, colonel, for you to seek a remedy."

"Will you tell me how I can escape your impertinence?"

"Yes, give up your scheme, come forward like a man, and admit you were wrong, and make what reparation you can."

"Wayne, if you again speak to me as though I were a villain, I will hold you responsible for your words."

"I am willing to be held responsible for my words."

"Are you a man of honor?"

"I claim to be."

"You have me at a disadvantage at this moment."

"How so?"

"You hold your weapons in your hands, I am unarmed."

"What would you have me do?"

"Meet me on equal terms."

"Am I to consider your words a challenge?"

"Yes."

"I do not accept challenges from criminals."

The words had just passed the detective's lips when there came the report of a weapon.

Bush dashed from the room as the detective closed in on Colonel Zara.

The latter had fired at the detective, the shot had missed its object, and ere the colonel could fire a second shot Wayne had closed with him.

The colonel was a powerful man and in the prime of life, but he was no match for an experienced fighter like Billy Wayne, and in a moment he was disarmed.

"Colonel, I must say that you are a man of honor," remarked the detective in a sarcastic tone.

"I owe no courtesy to a scoundrel!"

"You call me a scoundrel."

"I do."

"Who was the scoundrel who had the dead body of your ward's sister cast into the lake?"

The colonel wilted.

"We begin to understand each other, colonel."

"It is your time now, mine will come," said the colonel, in a husky voice.

"Yes, colonel, your time will come when the rope closes around your neck."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE detective had his man at bay; the colonel writhed, but he was helpless against the terrible man who was circling around him the evidences of a deep and damning crime.

"Go on," hissed the colonel, "do your worst; murder me if you choose, but remember the day of vengeance will come."

"Yes, colonel, the day of vengeance will come; it has come now. Listen to me; I've got all the 'points' down on you. I've every move of your scheme trailed. I could 'close in' on you at this moment, and hold you face to face with the consequences of your crime, but for the sake of others I wish to afford you a chance to make reparation and escape the doom which hangs over you."

"I ask no mercy at your hands. I defy you, villain; you can not blackmail me!"

"I would like to tell you a story, colonel."

"I do not wish to listen to your story."

"But you shall."

"I am at your mercy."

"There was a man who sought to steal a fortune."

"You can spare yourself the recital."

"This man held a secret," continued the detective.

"Bah! I know what you would say."

"I will omit the story and tell you, colonel, that I know Rose Richland lives. It was the body of her sister that was cast into the Black Mele."

The colonel glared wildly, but maintained a defiant attitude.

"Yours is a losing game, colonel, and I now make an appeal to you to draw back while you have a chance."

"Wayne, I will not admit or deny anything you may charge; I merely defy you. Now, go ahead!"

"You will not yield the game, colonel."

"I yield nothing to a blackmailing scoundrel. I defy you and Leon Embre, and I here swear that you both shall be brought to justice. It's your turn now—mine will come."

"All right, colonel. While it is my turn I will proceed and take every advantage. I propose to search this house."

"Such an outrage I will not submit to, Billy Wayne. Be careful; you may go too far."

"I will never give you another chance, colonel. I shall find Rose Richland, living or dead. If living, you shall explain the death of her sister; if dead, you will explain both mysteries. But, mark me well, when I call I'll have the evidence dead against you. I am Billy Wayne; and when I threaten, those who know me know that I am the man to make good my words."

"You have threatened me a great deal, Billy Wayne; and now, listen to me. You are working on a wrong theory. I am an innocent man. If you can find Rose Richland living, and will restore her to me, I will pay you fifty thousand dollars; but you can not find her while you spend your time trailing me. If there has been a conspiracy, I have had no hand in it, and if suspicion 'points' toward me, I am a wronged man."

"Innocent men do not make contracts with such characters as the fellow Bush."

"I admit I made a contract with that man. I made a contract with him to aid me in finding my ward, and he will so swear in court."

"It would be all right, colonel, only for one thing. I've 'the wood' on you. I've traced your incomings and outgoings for the last few days pretty well. I know why Bush was here to-night; I know why his men were posted all over your grounds. It was your game to down me, but I am not going under so easy. I tell you I've got your whole game. I gave you a chance to back out, but you defied me, and now you will take the consequences. Colonel, it is a terrible necessity, but I propose to bind and gag you."

"I will never consent to such an outrage!"

"I am not asking your consent, colonel. You 'pulled' on me, and I got the 'bulge' on you; and now listen—if you attempt to resist me, all the worse for yourself."

"You wish to search my house?"

"I do."

"I've no objection. I will aid you."
"Your offer of aid comes too late."

As the detective spoke, he seized the colonel and threw him to the floor, and, in a few seconds, the master of the house was helpless and speechless. Billy had made good at least one threat.

The detective passed from the room, locking the door on the outside, and, drawing forth his masked lantern, he commenced his search. He spent two hours going over the house. He had a suspicion that Rose Richland was concealed somewhere in the mansion. He was a man who knew how to search, and he went over the house in the most thorough manner; and, when he had concluded his search, he was fully satisfied that Rose was not a prisoner anywhere under that roof.

"It is certain that she is not concealed in this house," muttered Billy; and he started to go down-stairs to the room where he had left the colonel, bound and gagged. Upon passing from the attic, and reaching the second floor, the detective made a startling discovery. When he had ascended there was a light burning in the two lower halls; now, as he started to descend, he discovered that both lights had been extinguished.

The discovery was indeed a startling one as it suggested the fact that some one had entered the house and had commenced a game against him.

"Aha," muttered Wayne, "this means business;" and he was not mistaken; the extinguishing of the light did mean business, and he was destined to contend against a foe who in some respects was his match in dash, courage, and cunning.

As our readers will remember, when the struggle began between the detective and Colonel Zara, Bush seized the opportunity to dash from the room. The man feared Wayne and felt assured that the detective, although he had arrived late, had come prepared.

Bush dashed from the house and ran to the place where he had posted one of his men. It was Silviri he was looking for. He found the man gone.

"As I feared," he muttered, and he uttered a low signal call. An interval passed and he uttered a second signal, and there came an answer, and the next moment a man came creeping toward him.

"Is that you, Silviri?"

"Yes."

"What have you to report?"

The man was cautious. He did not know just how the land lay at that moment, and he evaded the question, Yankee fashion, by asking another.

"What's up?"

"Where have you been?" demanded Bush.

"I thought I heard a noise over in the grove, and I crept over to investigate."

"Did you see any one?"

"No."

"Have you received any signals from any of the men?"

"Not a signal. In fact, captain, I do not understand it at all."

"Our man is in the house."

"He is?"

"Yes."

"Hang it! he must have a method for making himself invisible; for I'll be hanged for a traitor, if I saw him go in, and I've been here watching close by till the moment I heard the noise over in the grove."

"How long were you absent?"

Silviri calculated in his mind the time that had elapsed since his treacherous give-away talk with the detective, and he answered:

"I can't tell exactly; but as I crawled over slow, it may be fifteen or twenty minutes since I left here."

"It was while you were away that Wayne must have entered the house; but, tell me, are you sure no one is over in the grove?"

"I saw no one."

"Did you make a thorough search?"

"I did."

It was the idea of Bush that the man Silviri was telling the truth. He was ready to believe that the man had heard a noise, as he suspected that Wayne had a large body of men concealed somewhere on the place.

CHAPTER XXXI.

When related to Silviri all that had occurred in the colonel's library

"That man is a wonder," said Silviri, "but

we've got him, after all. We now know he is there, and he must come forth."

"I don't know about that," said Bush.

"We must make him come."

"That's all right; but he may have come prepared."

Bush spoke in a low, husky voice, and Silviri discovered that his captain was a thoroughly scared man.

"Captain, he must not escape. We will get the men together, and close in around the house and make sure of him. Remember, there are seven of us, and he is alone."

Silviri had "squealed" to save his own life, but he would have been glad to see the detective silenced, despite his forced give-away.

"It would be all right, Silviri, but for one thing."

"What is it you fear?"

"That man may have twenty men within signal-call."

"Ah! if that's so, it would be risky business to attempt to close in on him."

"We will go and hunt up the other men. Come with me."

The two men moved along to the spot where Bush had placed another of his men. The man was not to be seen.

"Hang it, this looks bad!" he muttered.

Silviri uttered a signal. There came no answer. A moment passed, and he again signaled, but there came no answer.

Again Bush said:

"This looks bad."

"We will investigate," said Silviri, and he walked slowly around, and he soon returned and betrayed considerable excitement.

"I've found our man, captain."

"Where?"

"Bound and gagged and strapped to a tree."

"As I feared," said Bush, in a low, excited tone, and he asked:

"What did the man say?"

"I did not unbind him, I came to report to you."

The two men crawled to the place where the assassin, their comrade, was tree-bound, and it took Silviri but a moment to release his man.

"How came you there?" demanded Bush.

It was some seconds before the man could answer; the gag had stiffened his tongue, but after an interval he managed to say:

"I was pounced on."

"By whom?"

"A gang."

The man would not admit that he had been surprised and overpowered by a single man.

"Come with us," said Bush, and he proceeded to where another of his men had been stationed. The man could not be seen at his post and Silviri uttered a signal to which there came no answer.

"I reckon we'll have to hunt him up, cap. and I think now we'll find him as we found Bradley."

Silviri's surmise proved correct; the second man was found bound to a tree and gagged, and he too was released, and when questioned told the same story, asserting that he had been surprised and overpowered by a gang of masked men.

Bush proceeded to the different parts, and found all his men, one after the other, as he had found the first two, and when released, all told about the same story.

The gang retired to a distant spot and held a consultation of war. The men were all scared, all save Silviri; the latter urged decided measures, but the balance of the gang sided with the captain, and expressed their opinion that Wayne had come prepared to take care of them.

The men decided to beat a retreat, and like so many cravens, started to cross the grounds, and make for the place where they had picketed their horses. As they passed along they were brought to a sudden halt, they heard steps. Silviri at once volunteered to creep forward and see who the parties were whose steps they heard. He soon came upon a group of three men who were standing under the trees talking in a low tone. Their actions indicated that they were up to some secret game. Silviri weakened. He at once decided that Bush had formed the correct idea, and that the detective really did have men posted all over the grounds. He returned and reported the presence of the three men, and Bush at once gave command that the party should separate, and by different routes make their way to the place where their steeds were picketed.

Meantime strange incidents were occurring within the mansion. A few moments after the

detective had left the colonel bound in the library, a man crept up the front entrance to the house and made a survey of the surroundings, and after a moment he walked round and round the building in the same manner as our hero had done upon one or two occasions. The man's face was revealed as he finally advanced and peered through the library window, and it was the face of a desperate and resolute-looking fellow.

The library was on the first floor of the building, and a tall man by standing on tiptoe could easily secure a peep into the room. The fellow who had wandered so mysteriously around the house was a tall man, and as his glance rested upon the colonel stretched upon the floor an exclamation of surprise fell from his lips.

A moment he stood and gazed and then muttered:

"If that ain't the colonel you may shoot me for a horse-thief."

The man stepped away from the window and walked around once more toward the front of the house, when he suddenly espied a second man enveloped in a cloak and slouched hat moving swiftly along.

The first man put himself in the way of the second, and at once his presence was made known.

"Who are you?" demanded the man in the cloak and slouched hat as he started back and quick as thought drew a pistol.

"I think I know that voice," said the stranger.

"Who are you?"

"Yes, I know that voice, I am talking to Tom Zara."

"That's my name, who are you?"

"A friend."

"A foe may call himself a friend on a dark night."

"Tom Zara ain't looking for foes at his brother's threshold."

"Who are you? Speak?"

"My name is Breeze."

"Ned Breeze?"

"Yes."

"Honor bright?"

"Yes, honor bright."

"Ned Breeze, of all men on earth you are the man who will be most welcome at this house to-night!"

"Was I not expected?"

Tom Zara answered by asking a second question, in a surprised tone.

"Were you expected?"

"I ought to have been expected."

"Did my brother send for you, Ned?"

"Yes."

"Good!"

"Did he not tell you he expected me?"

"No."

"Well, I am here. And now, before we see the colonel, I wish you to let me into what is going on around here."

"Come in, and the colonel will offer his own explanations."

"No, no, Tom, go slow. Something is wrong."

"Something is wrong?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand. You will not refuse to see my brother after having come so far?"

"No; I will see him, but I don't want to be nipped. You know there is a price on my head."

"If my brother sent for you, he has business in your line. Come in and see him."

"No, no; open up the game to me. You have been away to-night?"

"Yes."

"I thought so, for a game has been worked while you were gone."

CHAPTER XXXII.

TOM ZARA gave a start. He had been away, and the mission he had been to execute was a desperate one.

"What do you mean, Breeze?" he said.

"I have been taking observations. You know I am a business man, and I usually go over the ground before I commence to dig."

"Well, well, what do you mean?"

"Something has happened to the colonel."

"Speak, man! What have you got to tell me?"

"First tell me, how long have you been away?"

"Since noon of to-day."

"What were your brother's plans to-night?"

"Come and let him offer all the necessary explanations."

"Excuse me; I am not running into a trap."

"Do you doubt the colonel?"

"No."

"Then what is the matter?"

"The colonel has met with bad luck."

Tom Zara caught Ned Breeze by the arm, and demanded:

"Has he been hurt?"

"Well, yes, I should say so."

"Dead?"

"I should say not."

"Will you explain, man?"

"I will explain after you have opened up the whole situation to me."

"But tell me about the colonel. If he is in trouble, I want to go to him."

"He is all right just at this moment, and whatever the situation is, we will bring him out all right. You know I understand my business. It is just possible, if we were to go into that house at this moment to help the colonel, we might get in 'hock' ourselves."

"Will you explain?"

"You can take my word. I tell you the colonel is all right for the present, and I must know all the 'points' to make sure that it can be made all right with him an hour from now."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Open up all the business to me."

"I have no right to do that."

"Give me all the 'points' you can. What was the programme for this night?"

Tom Zara was silent a moment, but at length he said:

"You know Billy Wayne?"

"Billy Wayne is known to me. Billy sleeps nights in the blessed consciousness that I am under ground, and no thanks to Wayne that I am speaking of the little affair at this moment."

"Billy Wayne is my brother's enemy."

"I am glad to hear that."

"You are glad?"

"Yes."

"How so?"

"It suggests that Billy is the man your brother wants out of the way."

"You're right."

"Well, there is no man on earth whom I would rather assist to a wooden overcoat. I'm only living to do that work. When he's under I'm prepared to go to sleep myself until the last awakening."

"I reckon my brother knew of your feeling toward Wayne."

"From what you say I reckon he did."

"There was a scheme on hand to down Wayne to-night."

"From what I have heard, I was beginning to think so. Tell me all about it."

Tom Zara proceeded, and narrated the plans that were afoot to do the work. Ned Breeze listened patiently, and, when Tom Zara had concluded, remarked:

"That Wayne is a devil! But why were you not on hand to assist at the execution?"

"I had other business for the night."

"I think your brother needed your company."

"Will you explain what you mean?"

"I will—from what I know, Wayne has turned the tables on the colonel."

"What do you know?"

"I know enough to lead me to believe that Wayne is in that house at this moment, lying in wait to gobble you and me when we go in there."

"What have you discovered?"

"That the colonel has been beaten."

"What facts have you?"

"Come with me, and, in a few seconds, you will have the facts as I have them; and then we will decide upon our course of action. Something must be done."

"You will stand by us?"

"I am delighted to be here! It's a night for a settlement between Wayne and me. He thinks he has the game, and I am set to have it myself; and, Tom, I've come here prepared."

"How prepared?"

"I've with me half a dozen of the truest and gamest men who ever started out on a little picnic of the kind we are having to-night—but come, step quickly but lightly, it may be that we have not much time to spare."

Ned Breeze led the way around to the library window and he offered to assist Tom Zara to look into the room.

Tom did look in and would have uttered a cry, if he had not been cautioned by Breeze.

"It's the colonel," he said.

"Yes, I recognized your brother at the first glance."

"He is bound and gagged."

"A good sign."

"A good sign?"

"Yes."

"It's terrible."

"No, no, they do not gag dead men. The colonel is alive and well, save a little stoppage at the mouth, which compels him to breathe through his nose."

"We must release him at once. Raise me and I will dash in the window and go to him."

"Oh, no, that would be your way but not mine."

"The colonel must not be left there bound and gagged."

"You're right. He must not be left there, but we must not be caught in a trap ourselves. Listen: I've an idea your brother has been placed there as a decoy."

"What will you do?"

"Come with me."

"I can not go away and leave the colonel."

"All right, if you are to run this thing, I will get out."

"What would you do?"

"Arrange matters so as to be prepared against a surprise."

"You have a plan?"

"Yes."

"I will act under your orders."

"Enough: come with me."

Ned Breeze led the way across the grounds, and reached a place where he came to a halt, and uttered a signal, and at once three men sprang to their feet and approached him.

"Follow," he said, and the party proceeded along a short distance, when Ned Breeze again uttered a signal, and three more men joined him.

Ned Breeze held a few moments' conversation with his men, and explained the situation as far as it was necessary for the carrying out of his plans.

As our readers have already discerned, Ned Breeze was a noted desperado. He was a man whom Billy Wayne had once run down. The two men had met in a fearful hand-to-hand struggle, and the detective had come out best, and as Ned had stated, Wayne had been led to believe that Breeze was dead.

The fellow, however, had recovered from his terrible wounds, and, as he had said, had lived on in hopes of some day seeking vengeance. Col. Zara had once had dealings with Breeze. He knew of the man's hatred of Wayne, and upon learning that our hero was on his track, he determined to take advantage of two incentives which he well knew would weigh with the desperate villain Ned Breeze. In the first place he knew that Breeze thirsted for vengeance, and in the second place he knew that the man was an inveterate gambler, and always in want of money. With Wayne under ground, Col. Zara felt he would have an easy road to the accomplishment of his schemes.

Having arranged his plans with his men, Breeze said to Tom Zara:

"Now then, we are ready to go to work. Come with me and before to-morrow's dawn either I or Billy Wayne will have 'journeyed beyond that bourne from whence no traveler returns.'"

Ned led the way back to the library window and it did not take him long to open it, when he drew himself up and balanced upon the sill.

"What will you do?" asked Tom.

"Wait and see," came the answer.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

NED BREEZE was very cautious in his movements. The man evidently feared that Wayne had really left the bound colonel lying on his library floor as a decoy.

The desperado balanced himself upon the window-sill, drew a pistol, and cocking it, stepped over into the room. He was cool in his movements, but watchful and wary.

The colonel lay perfectly still, and after a moment Breeze approached and leaned over and perceived that the master of the house lived.

Tom Zara meantime stood at the window; he had crawled to the window-sill and stood with a cocked revolver in his hand.

"Release my brother," said Tom.

Ned Breeze went to the door of the room and tried it; the door was locked on the outside and the little fact told a tale.

Breeze motioned to Tom Zara to enter the room; the colonel's brother obeyed, when Ned said:

"Release the colonel."

As Breeze spoke, two figures were seen at the window. The desperado had made ample preparations against a surprise, and while Tom was releasing his brother, Breeze stood with a pair of cocked revolvers in his hands, facing the door, ready to let drive should any one attempt to enter.

It took Tom Zara but a moment to release his brother, and he assisted the colonel to his feet.

It was some moments before the colonel was able to speak, but at length he managed to say, in a low tone:

"It's all right; there is only one man in the house."

Ned Breeze retreated from the door, and approached the colonel, as the latter, in answer to Tom's question, attempted to relate all that had occurred.

When the colonel had concluded, Ned Breeze said:

"So Wayne is in this house alone?"

"Yes."

"You are sure of that?"

"I am."

"Colonel, you sent for me?"

"I did."

"You named your terms in your letter?"

"I did."

"Those terms are to stand?"

"You have the proposition over my own signature."

"That settles it. I enter your service! and now what is Wayne doing here?"

The colonel had not told Breeze any of the circumstances that led to his controversy with Billy Wayne, and he did not desire to do so, and he answered:

"It is enough for you to know that Wayne is here. The man has joined a conspiracy against me. He imagines there is certain evidence concealed in my house, and he is making a search. It is sufficient for you to know that he is here, and that he is alone, and I will stand all the possible legal consequences."

"That's all right, colonel; if Wayne is in this house to-night, he will not leave it alive. He or I will go under. I've a little personal matter to settle with him, and I've only been waiting for an opportunity to meet him."

Ned Breeze uttered a low signal call, and two men entered the room through the window, and they and their leader held a few moments' consultation in an undertone. At the conclusion of the "talk" Ned Breeze said:

"Colonel, you must leave matters to me."

"I am willing to do so."

"You and your brother go through that window."

The colonel hesitated to obey.

"There will be trouble here, colonel. I do not desire that you should be present. Go to one of your neighbors; make some excuse for your visit even at this hour."

"What is your purpose?"

"An alibi."

The colonel was glad to go away.

Ned Breeze waited until he saw the colonel and Tom Zara out of the house, when he turned to his men, and said:

"A good scheme! We will fix Wayne, and pay ourselves for our trouble—or, at least, hold security for the payment of our claims. We will at least have the game in our hands."

The men understood their leader's trick and smiled their approval.

A moment later the three desperados passed from the library. It was an easy matter for them to force open the door, and they passed along the hall; and it was just at this moment that Billy Wayne discovered their presence, as described in a preceding chapter.

Wayne had fulfilled his purpose in that house for the night. He was prepared to leave, and could have made his escape, and would have done so, but for one fact—he overheard a word spoken that led him to suspect that it was not Bush and his party who were on the lay for him.

The detective stood at the head of the stairs and watched. He saw one of the men draw a masked lantern; and, as the man raised the lamp, its ray momentarily illuminated the face of one of the men. It was the face of Ned Breeze.

"Aha!" muttered Billy Wayne; "it is as I expected! All right, I will give these men a chance to have a little fun."

Billy Wayne would not have feared an encounter with the four ruffians, had any particular part of his plans demanded a fight; but, as matters stood, there was no need for him to invite a combat, so he concluded to "slope."

Wayne had little difficulty in getting from the house, and was soon down upon the gravel path that ran around the mansion, and he was proceeding along softly when suddenly he found himself in the grasp of two powerful men. He was a cunning man, always on his guard, but he had fallen into a trap, and had been caught at last. The men had him dead, as they had come upon him unawares; but Billy Wayne was an old hand. He never gave up the ship, and his ready wit came to his aid at the critical moment, when he found himself thus suddenly "nipped."

He laughed in a pleasant manner as the men seized him, and still as coolly as though the men were indeed his friends:

"Easy, boys, you've collared the hound while the fox is stealing away."

"Who are you?"

"I'm the messenger of Ned Breeze at this moment, and I was sent to catch you fellows, but you've caught me."

The detective spoke in such an easy, off hand manner the men were thrown off their guard.

"You were sent after us?"

"Yes."

"What's wanting?"

"I am to lead you two fellows into the house."

The men at once released their hold upon the detective, and lowered their weapons, and one of them said:

"Lead on, old man, we are here to obey our leader."

The next moment the two men went down. Billy Wayne had worked one of his old tricks.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE moment Billy had upset the two men he darted away like a deer, while the men rose to their feet, and one of them said:

"I'll be hanged if he didn't do that nice."

"Well, I should say he did."

"Who is he?"

"I reckon we had not better inquire, and at the same time we had better forget that we ever saw him."

The man's partner understood the significance of the remark, and it was agreed between them that they would not mention their little adventure.

Meanwhile, Ned Breeze and his men were on the lay low for Billy Wayne in the house. They calculated he would conclude his search and start to come down the stairs, when they would do for him; in other words, shoot him down without mercy. Time passed, however, and Billy Wayne did not put in an appearance, and Ned Breeze began to grow uneasy, and after a few moments he held a consultation with his men and agreed upon a different plan of action. He went out to the grounds and signaled his men, who speedily joined him and all hands returned within the house.

The gas was lighted, the house being illuminated as though for a grand party, and a search commenced; but, alas, Billy Wayne, as our readers know, had "folded his tent like the Arab," and had "as silently stolen away."

Ned Breeze was angry, but the game had gone against him, and as he expressed it: "There was no use kicking." His men were ordered off to a rendezvous and Ned waited to meet the colonel. In due time the master of the house, accompanied by his brother, put in an appearance, and the desperado's discomfiture was fully discussed, the latter claiming that the detective had not been in the house at the time. He started in on the lay for him, and the fellow Breeze concluded his statement with his declaration:

"But I will fix him yet!"

The three men remained together and had a long talk, and a new plan was arranged for catching Billy Wayne.

Meantime the detective had made his way to the home of Leon Embre, and learned from Victor Verder that his master had not been home since early in the afternoon. The information was not pleasant to our hero, and he decided to remain in the Embre mansion until morning. Day dawned, but Leon did not put in an appearance.

Billy Wayne made diligent inquiry, but could only learn that the young master of the house

had gone off the previous afternoon without stating his destination, and he had not returned.

The detective remained at the house all day, and at night Leon returned. Our hero had never in all his life greeted a man with greater joyousness and warmth.

Leon Embre and the detective held a consultation, and later on, but still early in the evening, Wayne took his departure. He had made up his mind to follow up a little clew he had fallen upon during his visit the night previous to the tavern.

Billy Wayne borrowed a fleet horse from Leon Embre and started off after having first swung a common canvas bag over his shoulder.

Our hero put his horse to his speed, and, while on the turnpike, covered a great distance in a short time, and it was still early in the evening when he left his horse at a roadside inn, and, taking his bag with him, started off afoot, and, after half an hour's walk, reached a house standing alone. No roads led to the place, and there was not even a lane—simply a footpath across moor and field.

As the detective approached the house, he saw the glimmer of a light shining through a window on the ground floor; and, upon stepping upon the porch and glancing in through the window, he saw a woman seated at a table reading.

Billy Wayne had got himself up as an elderly gentleman, and, as one glanced at the seemingly harmless old man, they would not have dreamed that he was the terrible Billy Wayne, and that, at that moment, really a walking arsenal of concealed weapons.

Wayne rapped at the door; but there came no immediate answer to his summons. He waited a few moments and rapped again, when he saw that the light had been taken from the room where the woman sat, and, an instant later, a gleam shot through the side lights of the front door.

"Who is there?" came the query from the inside, in a woman's voice.

"A stranger," answered the detective.

"What do you want?"

"Is this the home of Alfred Gatten?"

"It is," answered the woman, and, as she spoke, she opened the door. Holding the lamp aloft, she fixed her magnificent eyes on the stranger.

"Is Mr. Gatten at home?"

"He is not at home."

"I am sorry," said the detective; "I have come a long distance to see him; when will he be at home again?"

"I can not tell. He may come to-night. He may come to-morrow. He may not come in a week."

Fortune favored the detective; even as he spoke a vivid flash of lightning illuminated the scene for an instant, and was immediately followed by a violent clap of thunder.

"We are about to have a storm," said the detective. The woman made no answer.

"Can I ask shelter until the storm is passed?"

The woman was silent a moment. She appeared unwilling to ask the stranger to stay, but at length after having eyed him keenly she said:

"You may as well come in until the storm is over."

The detective stepped inside the door, and closed it behind him, and the woman led the way to the room where she had been sitting at the moment our hero first glanced in upon her.

Wayne took a seat, and the woman placed herself at the table. She appeared nervous or ill at ease, but suddenly seeming to recollect herself she asked:

"Can I offer you any refreshment?"

"No, thank you."

"Are you a stranger to my husband?" the woman asked.

"I do not believe your husband will recollect me, although I used to know him well many years ago."

"Where was he living then?"

"In San Francisco."

During all the time the woman was talking, she kept her wondrously keen black eyes fixed upon the detective, and as she gazed, her face assumed a more anxious look, and her tones and manner betrayed considerable nervousness.

The storm meantime broke over the house in all its fury, the lightning flashed, and the thunder rolled, and the rain fell in torrents.

"It will be a rough road for me to return, even after the rain is over," said Wayne.

The woman took the hint, and said:

"You can remain here until morning if you wish."

"If you can keep me as well as not, I should like to remain."

"You can remain, sir, as well as not, and you can retire at any moment."

"As I am very much fatigued, I will accept your kind invitation and retire at once."

The woman went to the room and called, and a moment later an old negro came in answer to her summons.

The woman directed the negro to show the stranger to a certain room, and the latter thanked her in the most gracious manner as he rose to follow the servant.

The moment the woman was alone, a change came over the expression on her face, and as a startled exclamation fell from her lips, she muttered:

"What can Billy Wayne want here?"

CHAPTER XXXV.

ALFRED GATTEN was a man who had once been famous as a criminal. He had been run down, tried, convicted, and punished, and upon his release from jail he had not been known to associate with any of his former companions. He had leased a farm, and had pretended to go into business as a fancy-stock breeder, and as far as the police knew he was living an honest life. Billy Wayne knew of nothing to the contrary; yet, as stated, during his visit to the tavern the previous night, he had fallen upon a little clew which led him to resolve to visit the new home of the reformed criminal, and little did the detective, even when carrying out his resolution, dream of the wonderful discoveries that were to follow his investigation.

While Wayne was being shown to his room, the woman who had announced herself as Gatten's wife, continued her startling soliloquy.

One fact was strangely sure, she had recognized the detective, and, considering his disguise, her recognition was most wonderful; and still more wonderful to relate, Billy Wayne had a suspicion that the woman had recognized him; still, he determined to go on and carry out his original idea.

He was a brave man, but he was getting a little uneasy. He did not bear a charmed life, and too many assassins were concentrating against him to make the situation at all pleasant. The time might come when his toes would get the bulge on him, the odds against him were very great. He could have made his life safer by closing in on Col. Zara, as the latter was the instigator of all the attempts on his life; but as matters stood he had no direct hold upon the colonel, and he did not propose to arrest him and have the laugh turned on himself as a reward.

It was necessary that Billy should hurry up his investigations and secure some positive and substantial proofs of the crime that had been attempted, and possibly actually committed.

Meantime, as stated, the woman was indulging a soliloquy; she said:

"I do not know that I have done right in harboring that man, and yet had I refused him shelter his suspicions would have been aroused; one thing is certain, if trouble comes upon us it is Al's fault, as I urged him not to let *Bush and his friends draw him into this thing*, and I know he would not have gone into it had he known that Billy Wayne was interested in the affair. And he is, I'll swear, and like the sleuth-hound that he is, he has trailed direct to this house. Well, well, if worst comes to worst, it is well to have Wayne under this roof. He has come here *secretly*, and if the necessity arises they will not look for him here!"

There was a terrible expression upon the woman's face as she uttered the suggestive words we have recorded.

Meantime, Billy Wayne was shown to his room, and as he closed the door upon the old servant he also muttered to himself, saying:

"I must act quickly here or my game will be spoiled."

The detective had told the woman that he was greatly fatigued, but it was noticeable that he did not retire or make any preparations for so doing; on the contrary, he removed his boots only, and then sat himself in a chair for a long time.

At length he rose to his feet, went to the door of the room, placed his ear to the key-hole, and listened, and while so engaged his eyes were fixed upon the floor.

A footstep was heard in the hall, and Billy

permitted a gratified smile to flit over his face; but suddenly the smile faded away, and a look of intense interest shone in his eyes as he crossed the room, seized the candle, and dropped to the floor on his hands and knees.

At last he had made a tangible discovery. He had made a genuine find. From the floor he raised a single thread of long hair, and he examined it carefully, close to the light of the candle.

"I am on the right track at last!" he muttered. "This never fell from the tresses of Mrs. Gatten, her hair is raven-black, and this is auburn; and the hair of Rose Richland is auburn, and the girl was in this house—in this room! Yes, yes; at last I have a real, living clew!"

The detective commenced a critical examination. He searched through the one closet in the room; he searched through the old fashioned bureau; and he went through the bed, only as a man who understands his business can search; but nothing rewarded his efforts. But he did not despair. He went carefully around the room on his hands and knees, turning up the edge of the carpet as he went, and at length his long search was rewarded. From under the carpet, in one corner of the room, he drew a crumpled piece of paper, and, as his eyes fell upon the paper, a thrill went through his heart.

The detective went to the candle, smoothed out the paper, and discovered writing in lead pencil. His eyes ran over the lines and his heart stood still. Indeed, he had found a tangible clew at last, and a clew that would lead to the finding of the lost girl or the hanging of her assassins.

The note read as follows:

"To whoever may find this note: I am Rose Zara. I was brought to this house when or how or by whom I do not know. The abduction took place on my wedding night. I may be doomed to death; I fear such will be my fate; but let it be known through this note falling into the hands of friends, that I have left a late will, regularly signed and attested, in the hands of my attorneys, and in that will all bequests to my guardian, Colonel Zara, are revoked, and—I hear footsteps coming; it may be that the hour for my execution draws near. I hide this in hopes that some day it may fall into the hands of friends. I sign my real name.

"ROSE RICHLAND."

The above was the letter that fell into the hands of the detective, and our readers can well understand that he labored under great excitement while reading the remarkable missive.

Muttering to himself the detective said:

"Your letter has indeed fallen into the hands of a friend, Miss Richland, and, if my life is spared, a few hours will solve the mystery of your fate."

A moment the detective was silent; but again, after an interval, he communed, in an audible tone, with himself:

"I do not believe the girl is dead—I believe she is a prisoner in this house, and the nervousness of Mrs. Gatten is explained."

The detective looked at his watch. It was still lacking an hour of midnight, and, with stealthy movement, he opened his room door, and stepped out into the hall.

Here he met Mrs. Gatten, when the following conversation took place.

"Madam, you had a female prisoner in this house—that could not be without your knowledge."

The woman turned deadly pale, as she answered:

"I will admit that there was a female in this house."

"A prisoner, madam?"

"Yes a prisoner."

"Do you know who the lady was, madam?"

"Yes."

"Who was she?"

"The wife of a man who was once a friend of my husband."

"Do you wish me to believe that story?"

"You can do as you choose; it is the truth."

"I know better; you know better. But, for form's sake, we will admit that the lady who was confined here was the wife of your husband's friend; and now, madam, where is the lady?"

"I do not know."

"Look me in the face and answer me. Did any harm come to the wife of your husband's friend?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"I will admit that you believe the woman to be the wife of your husband's friend; but I tell you now, you were deceived as to her identity. I am looking for that woman. I must find her; and if I find her alive, I will guarantee you and your husband immunity from punishment; if I do not find her alive, it will go hard with you both."

"If I was deceived I can not help it."

"Where is the woman?"

"She was taken away from here."

"When?"

"Some days ago."

"By whom?"

"Her husband."

"Who was her husband?"

"I do not know his name. He was my husband's friend, not mine."

"Madam, I will give you one chance. Will you tell me the truth, or must I at once proceed to extreme measures?"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE woman displayed considerable trepidation, but she answered firmly:

"I swear that I am unable to give you any information. I know nothing about the woman."

"You saw her?"

"Yes."

"You talked with her?"

"Yes."

"She must have told you her tale?"

"She did."

"What did she tell you?"

"She told me she was the daughter of a rich man who died and left all his fortune to her, and that her guardian was seeking to murder her so that he could secure all her money."

"She told you this tale?"

"Yes."

"And what did you think of it?"

"I knew that she was crazy, and paid no attention to her wild story."

"You knew that she was crazy?"

"Yes."

"How did you know?"

"I had been so informed, and her manner and wild stories confirmed the charge."

The woman by her statement proved her shrewdness, and had she been dealing with a less keen man than Billy Wayne, she might have thrown him off, but Billy saw through her little game and said:

"You are a good 'un, madam, you play it well, but you can not deceive me; you know the girl was not insane; but we will let that pass, and I will be your friend if you will answer me just one question truthfully."

"I am seeking to answer all your questions truthfully."

"Did any harm come to your husband's friend's wife?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"She was not murdered?"

"Why should a man murder his wife, especially when she was young and beautiful?"

"Where is she now?"

"I do not know."

"She is not in this house?"

"I swear she is not."

"You have no further information to give me?"

"I have not."

"Well, madam, I propose to search your house."

The woman trembled as she answered:

"I can not help what you do."

"I came here prepared."

"Certainly, I know that."

"How is it your chance to know so much?"

"Billy Wayne always goes prepared."

"Do you love your husband?"

"Certainly I do."

"You would not wish to see him lying dead before you?"

The woman's face became ghastly.

"If anything befalls your husband you can thank yourself."

"How?"

"By disclosure of the game you will save him."

"There is no game."

"Madam, I know you have had communication with some one since I parted with you down-stairs."

"It is not so."

"Very well, you are warned. I have given you a chance to save your husband."

"I told you my husband was away."

"You said he might return to-night."

"He will not return to-night."

"All right for him if he does not, and now, madam, I've some unpleasant information for you."

The woman remained silent.

"I do not propose that you shall convey any information concerning my movements."

"I have no such intention."

"I will make sure that you do not. I propose to bind and gag you."

"This is an outrage!"

"I know it."

"Then why do you commit such a wrong?"

"It is required in the way of business, and, mark me, if you offer any resistance it will be your own fault if you are injured."

"Promise to leave this house and I will tell all."

"I will only answer truly."

"What are your questions?"

"Is Rose Richland living?"

"She is."

The detective's heart leaped with joy.

"Is she in this house?"

"No."

"Where is she?"

"Not far from here."

"Can you lead me there?"

The woman did not make an immediate answer.

"Can you lead me there?"

"You are the murderer of my husband."

"Your husband would have murdered me. I killed him in defense of my own life."

"And no harm shall come to me?"

"No harm shall come to you."

"I will go and bring Rose Richland to you."

"No; you must lead me to her."

"Come," said the woman.

The detective was compelled to step over the dead.

He followed the woman to the upper hall. The latter slipped on a hood and shawl, and, pistol in hand, Billy Wayne followed her.

Half a mile from the Gatten house they came in sight of a little stone building. The woman knocked at the door, and it was a long time before there came an answer to her summons; but at length there came a voice from the inside, inquiring:

"Who is there?"

"Mrs. Gatten."

At once the door was opened by an old negress, who stood at the threshold with a lamp in her hand.

"Where is the young lady?"

"Sound asleep, missis."

"Will you disturb her?" demanded the detective.

"I will. Lead me to the door of her room."

"Lead the gentleman there, Eliza."

The old negress hesitated.

"It's all right; lead the gentleman there."

A moment later the detective knocked at the door of a little room on the second floor of the stone house, and, after a time, there came a voice, demanding:

"Who is there?"

In as gentle and reassuring voice as he could assume the detective said:

"A friend, Miss Richland."

"A friend?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Please prepare yourself to accompany me; open the door."

"I am prepared to accompany a friend; but I can not open the door; I am a prisoner."

"Can I come in?"

"Yes, yes; if you are indeed a friend, come in. I am a despairing woman."

The negress stood by, and the detective said:

"Open the door."

The negress obeyed, and, light in hand, Billy stepped into the room.

His quest was over at last. Indeed, it was Rose Richland.

Explanations followed, and in a few moments the girl was ready to accompany our hero. The party walked back to Gatten's house, an extra horse was procured, and the return journey to the house of Leon Embre commenced.

It was well on toward morning when our hero reached the house with the rescued girl, and during the journey he learned all the circumstances attending her abduction.

Her guardian, at an early hour during the day, had requested to see her alone in his library, just previous to the ceremony, and he had bade her let no one know of her intended visit. He had told her to steal into his room, as he had an important communication to make.

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- 129 Eyre's Acquittal. By Helen B. Mathers.
- 130 Miss Milne and I. By the author of "A Yellow Aster."
- 131 Vashti and Esther. By the Writer of "Belle's Letters."
- 132 Beyond the City. By A. Conan Doyle.
- 133 A Scandal in Bohemia. By A. Conan Doyle.
- 134 The Sign of the Four. By A. Conan Doyle.
- 135 The Heir of Linne. By Robert Buchanan.
- 136 Treasure Island. By Robert Louis Stevenson.
- 137 The Stickit Minister. By S. R. Crockett.
- 138 The Suicide Club. By Robert Louis Stevenson.
- 139 The Merry Men. By Robert Louis Stevenson.
- 140 Prince Otto. By Robert Louis Stevenson.
- 141 The Misadventures of John Nicholson. By Robert Louis Stevenson.
- 142 An Inland Voyage. By Robert Louis Stevenson.
- 143 The Silverado Squatters. By Robert Louis Stevenson.
- 144 The Master of Ballantrae. By Robert Louis Stevenson.